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THE LEADING WESTERN MAG. MAGAZINE

THAT BLOODY GALVANIZED YANK!

STIRRING SAGA OF THE STAGE TRAILS

by **DEE LINFORD**

SPANISH PATCH'S LAST FIGHT

by **L. L. FOREMAN**

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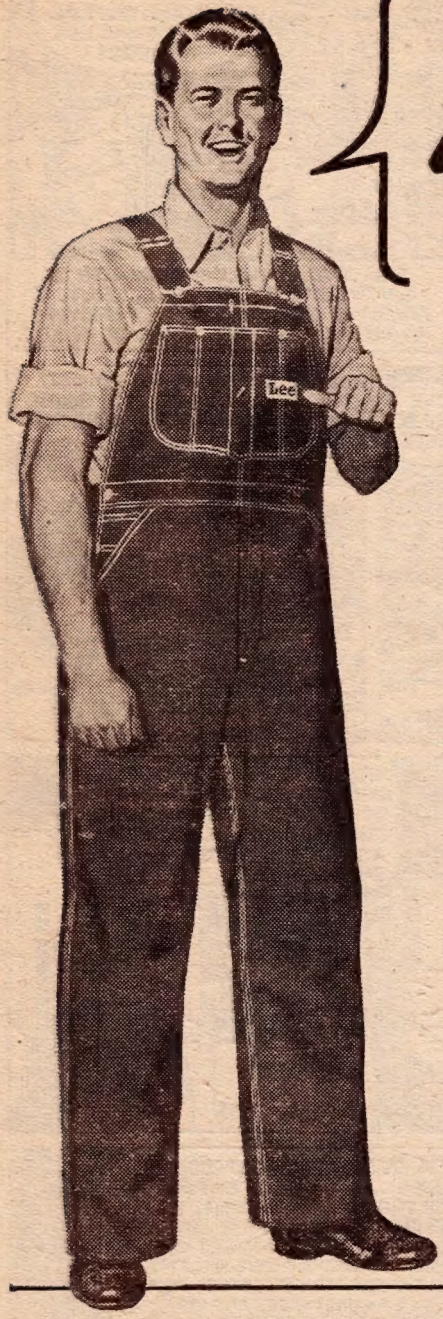

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WESTERN MAGAZINE

APRIL ISSUE PUBLISHED MARCH 3RD!

VOLUME 57 MARCH, 1950 NUMBER 3

Dynamic Novel of the Old Frontier

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Turncoat to the South, traitor to the North, Rebel Jim Aspinall had one last chance to redeem his manhood—by joining the blood-thirsty land-pirate army of fighting men forever damned!

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The killing of the bison stopped when the sergeant rolled up his sleeves. . . .

Buffalo Bones ..... John Parker 97

In the old days, was a man's brand on a buffalo skull as legal as that on a beeve's hide?

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CUSTER'S FIRST FALL

By COSTA CAROUSSO

THERE'S hardly a man in America who hasn't been thrilled by the many heroic exploits of General George A. Custer, commander of the ill-fated Seventh Cavalry, which was annihilated on the Little Big Horn, but few know of the general's least glamorous adventure: of the day Custer shot and killed his wife's favorite saddle horse—while riding it!

One spring day in 1867, while Custer was on his way to Fort Hays, he saw a huge buffalo ahead of him. Since it was the first he had ever seen so close, he drew one of his pistols, dug in his spurs and galloped after it, thinking he'd like its head for a trophy.

Drawing near, he reined in close, intending to draw alongside and kill the shaggy animal the same way professional hunters did. At that instant the buffalo dug in its hoofs and wheeled to attack, but Custer was riding so fast that he flashed by untouched. The general turned his horse and pressed to the attack, determined the buffalo should not escape.

Again he drew in close, and at the crucial moment the bull wheeled and charged, making the horse veer sharply to one side. Undaunted, Custer advanced a third time, but when the buffalo attacked, the terrified horse reared so sharply that even though he was an expert horseman the general was almost thrown. He had to reach both hands for the reins to control his plunging mount.

Somehow his finger tightened on the trigger of his pistol. There was a sharp explosion and the horse fell to its knees, killed instantly by a bullet in its brain. Custer was thrown over the horse's head and fell almost in front of the maddened bull. But the buffalo, apparently baffled by the sudden turn of affairs, merely pawed the ground defiantly for a moment, then wheeled and lunged away.

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IN THE SADDLE

"HOW-COME you don't go loco, readin' Western stories day in and day out?" Such was the question rammed at us the other day by a bow-legged, sawed-off little jasper who'd arrived in town from Texas to have himself a whingaroo.

Many, many times, pardners, have we been asked the same thing. And, strange as it may seem, we haven't become any crazier than any other gent in a similar line of business. In fact we *like* to read Westerns. We feel right proud when we run across a story that hits straight to the heart.

Also, many times when we take leave of a desk cluttered with manuscripts dealing in the magic history of the old frontier, we go a step farther. We drop down to the nearest moving picture house and thrill for an hour to the colorful figures who move across the screen performing the derring do so dear to the hearts of all lovers of Frontier action.

We get a kick out of the men who herded thousands of longhorns up from Texas to the tough, roaring, blood-drenched streets of Dodge City; to the frock-coated, high-hatted, pale-faced tinhorns who bet Death on the turn of a card. Pulses move quicker when hard-rock men meet in mortal combat with a Colt .45, a scantling or horny pair of fives. The arrival of U. S. Cavalry in the proverbial nick of time still increases the old heartbeat.

Then, too, you get the music of the old West. The melancholy, haunting hymns of the cowboy to his resting beeves. The lilt of the fiddlers hammering hell out of a square dance. The sad tinkle of a piano in a pioneer deadfall as two hard-bitten, boot-tough hombres get primed to go to the smoke.

Nope, friend, we don't get a bit jaded with the ghosts of the old-timers. We liked them as a kid, and still do. These folks—cowboy, gambler, river man, miner, sheriff, outlaw—they're still "good" and "bad" men to us. We become nostalgic for the days when we sat on the edge of our nickelodeon hard chair and damn' near blew our top when the Saturday serial came to a smashing, crashing conclusion with the man-hunter dangling over the edge of a cliff and the dastard lighting a dynamite fuse to blow him to perdition.

Come wars and rumors of wars, atom bombs, guided missiles, Uncle Joe and Cousin Adolph, they can't take that old-time Western razzle-dazzle from the American people. It's their heritage. We love our books, magazines and papers dealing with Western lore. The kids on the street togged out in everything from Stetson to boots and spurs. The dude ranch addicts and the few ancient desert rats still seeking their one big strike.

The April issue of *Dime Western Magazine*—out March 3rd!

The Editor

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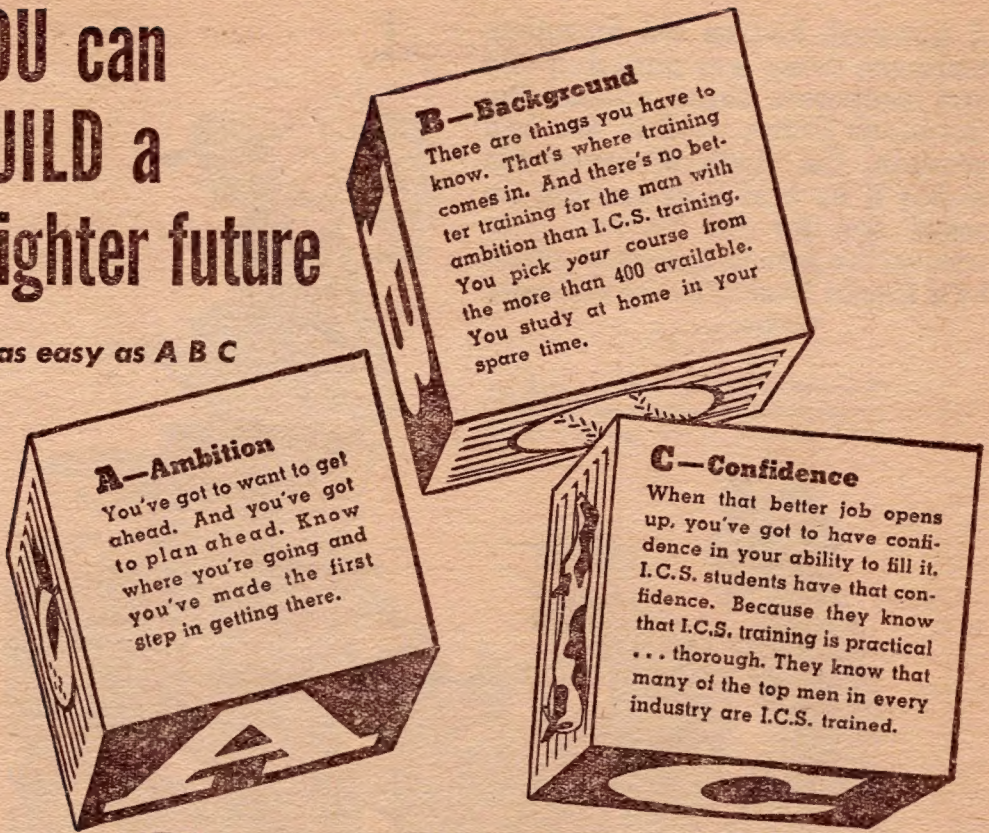
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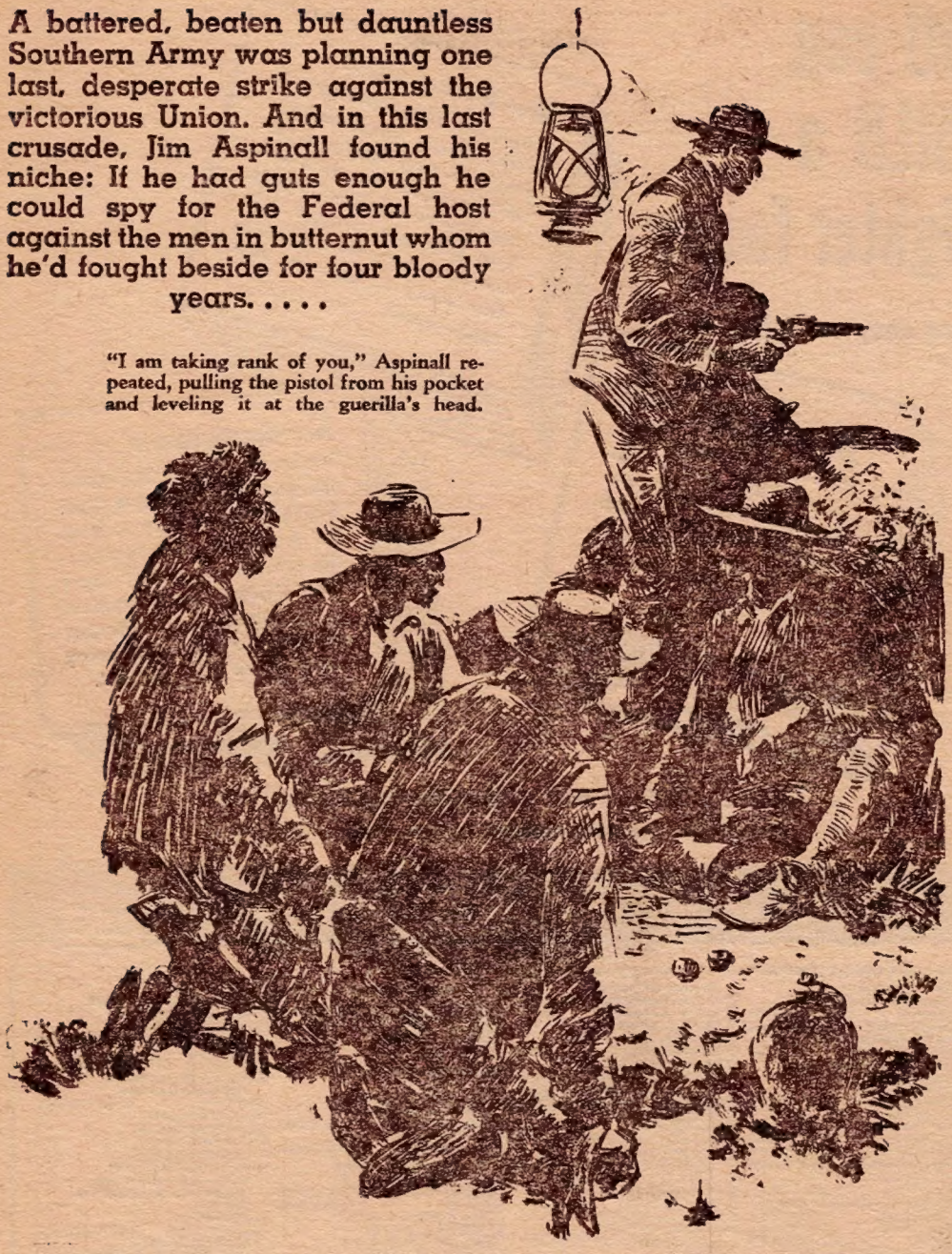

"I am taking rank of you," Aspinall repeated, pulling the pistol from his pocket and leveling it at the guerilla's head.

THAT BLOODY GALVANIZED YANK!

Dramatic Novel of the Bloody Trail Back from the War Between the States

By

DEE LINFORD

CHAPTER ONE

The Bloody Year

IN THE lobby of the Planters' House hotel, Denver station on the Holladay Overland Stage line, Private Jim Aspinall sat on a high-backed divan, shoulders drawn up like a shield against the fellowship of the crowd that ebbed and flowed around him, making the place a bedlam.

Outside, a hot summer wind scooped dust from the street and spread it over the weather-blistered buildings in blinding, choking clouds. But the lobby door stood open, and through it—in and out—surged the cream of the frontier's floating aristocracy: Self-impressed politicians and mining moguls in broadcloth, burnsides and stovepipe hats. Doll-faced women in hoops and crinoline. Sleek-cat gamblers and English sports in cutaway coats. Sashed and sabered Colorado Volunteer cavalrymen, resplendent in the martial trappings of the unwarlike social soldier. All feverishly oblivious to the heat and dust. All clamoring for transportation out of the threatened city.

For the year was 1865—the Bloody Year on the Plains. The War Between the States had ended, but Lincoln was

dead, and fear and confusion ruled the land. The Army was engrossed in the Southern occupation, and the frontier outposts were forgotten children—undergarrisoned, unsupplied, out of touch. From Kansas to Utah the tribes had risen in opportune holy war, and troops enlisted for the war's duration were mutinous and ungovernable, refusing to leave their barracks, demanding discharge. Wagon trains and stagecoaches attacked within sight of the posts were left to their own devices, their stark, hellish ends.

Between Fort Kearney and Green River, thirty Holladay stations had been destroyed, the keepers killed, the livestock driven off. Julesburg was in ashes, Kearney besieged, and Denver itself was under martial law, faced by famine if not by actual attack. Travelers caught in the wildfire were dead or marooned in the way-stations, railing ineffectually against Ben Holladay and the do-nothing-army—from Grant and Stanton to the wooden-faced regulars, like Aspinall.

"By the Lord, Ben Holladay's business is hauling people and mail an' freight, ain't it? If he can't honor his franchise, I'll see it goes to one who can. I'll wire the postmaster general!"

It was a venerable "courtesy colonel" of Colorado Volunteers who spoke. And, behind eyes as gray as the uniform he once had worn, Jim Aspinall smiled a smile that combat soldiers reserve for bombproofs and drawing room warriors.

The colonel must be necromantic, the private told himself. Or maybe he doesn't know the telegraph line is cut in hundred places between here and Atchison!

It seemed an excellent joke, and the soldier's smile touched his wind-cracked lips. The colonel caught the smile and glowered. Soldiers were unpopular, just then.

"You, soldier!" he thundered, sighting down his pointed finger as he would sight a pistol. "What are you doing here? What is your command, and why are you not with it? By heaven, if your officers won't assume responsibility for you stragglers, I'll take that responsibility upon myself. . . . Stand up when an officer speaks to you!"

The blast of sound and the damning finger brought all eyes in the room to Jim Aspinall, and the gleam in the slate-eye gaze thinned to an ironic glint. Then the private bent forward, as if to comply with the order. But, instead of rising, he knocked the ashes from his pipe and settled back comfortably on the divan.

"Whose freight y'u aim to haul out of Denver, Colonel?" he asked in a soft, sweet drawl. "Surely not your own?"

The shocked territorial halted as if he had been slapped. His choleric complexion flowered. His eyes protruded and he seemed to choke on his very breath.

"By heaven, soldier," he spluttered, "you have been insolent to your last officer! I will make an example of you that will stop this sort of thing. I will—"

Jim Aspinall never would know exactly whether the colonel intended to have him executed on the spot, or subject to torture ahead of hanging. For a stage company clerk approached at that moment, caught the private's eye, and jerked a thumb at a door marked DIVISION SUPERINTENDENT—KEEP OUT.

"Soldier," the clerk said, "Mr. Holladay will see you now."

JIM ASPINALL, standing to his lean height, had an impression of the territorial colonel's deflated countenance. Following the clerk across the crowded room, he had an impression of the other faces. All registered the same surprised protest, the same sullen incredulity.

They were people who counted. They had money, influence and character. They had been trying to see Ben Holladay ever since he had arrived in Denver a couple of days before, from New York City, only to be rebuffed by unimpressed clerks. Now the transportation magnate had the added effrontery to continue to ignore them while he interviewed a common private, and a disrespectful one, at that!

"I've heard the man is very coarse," a dowager in diamonds and homespun declared punitively, as if to shed light on the outrage. "He's practically illiterate, they say. Lives in a castle and spits on the floor! Just between you and I and the gatepost, I'm not a mite surprised!"

The soldier's gray eyes glowed again. But underneath his sardonic exterior he was somewhat taken back himself. He had been ordered to Denver from Fort

Laramie as a result of a puzzling personal interview with General P. E. Connor, commander of the Department of the Plains. He expected assignment to one of the small suicide garrisons at some beleaguered Holladay swing station west of the Platte. Ex-rebel soldiers serving with Union forces were consistently handed the muddy end of the stick—and justly so. But he'd not expected to be received by the stagecoach king himself!

It was with a variety of emotions, therefore, that he approached the formidable oak door. But uppermost, and in safe command of other emotions, was an attitude of ultimate indifference to whatever was in store. So much had happened in the last two years that Private Jim Aspinall, USA—lately Major James Aspinall, CSA—would have embarked on a journey to the moon and never once looked back.

"PRIVATE ASPINALL," the clerk announced, then quietly withdrew, closing the door behind him. The soldier stood loosely erect, poignantly conscious of the size and the luxury of the room in which he found himself. The thick-pile carpet was like soft turf beneath his feet. Great masculine chairs yawned invitingly, and there was a gun rack and a chandelier.

Jim Aspinall had forgotten that there were spacious rooms with carpets, gunracks and chandeliers. It seemed cruel that he should be reminded, cruel that such rooms still should be. Nostalgia caught him by the throat, and in that instant Jim Aspinall for the first time in years longed for a frilled silken lap into which he could lower his face and cry. Then the hurt, bewildered boy withdrew, and the man stood strong and desolate, the capacity to hate reborn in him. The hate and the sustaining anger. The deadly bitterness.

"Private Aspinall?"

The voice was booming and genial, and because it was, it seemed an additional injury, a greater wrong. Then an iron will stiffened the man, routing the rebellious boy completely. And Private Jim Aspinall knew then that he would not break. Not because of a gunrack and a chandelier.

He didn't know why it should seem important that he not break. But it did. And he included the carpet and the chandelier in his hatred because they had struck at him in an unguarded moment. He found himself homesick for the impersonal discomfort of the Company C barracks, back at Laramie.

"Yes, seh!" he said meticulously. For he could still be punctilious when it pleased him to be so. And the soft, sweet slur was in his tone again, covering his bitterness as the leather sheath covered the blade at his belt.

"Good. Sit down. I'll be with you directly."

Jim Aspinall murmured his thanks, correctly. But he preferred to stand. There were ghosts in those great soft chairs, and the tearful boy must be kept in his place. Besides—well, a Galvanized Yankee must not pamper his haunches. They might forget whose haunches they were.

From where he stood, outwardly insouciant and indifferent, the soldier could see his host in profile, standing at the window, studying a paper in his hand. He had never seen Ben Holladay at close range before, and now that the unmanning nostalgia had passed, he looked at the fabled master of divers arts with quickening interest.

Beauregard! he thought, conscious of an odd wrenching at the heart that went always with the remembered names. Then he shook his head. No. Not Beauregard. But cast in the Beauregard mold. Big in a way that transcended mere bigness. Black-haired, black-bearded. Big-nosed, big-jawed. Darkly handsome. Bizarre and fiery as Beauregard. A man whose name was a trade-mark wherever rails ended and horse-drawn transport began.

Forty years to fetch the Children of Israel a measly three hundred miles? . . . Reverend, Ben Holladay would have brung them through in thirty-six hours!

Jim Aspinall, disillusioned soldier, was bitterly unimpressed with big brass, military or civilian. But he knew certain lines in Greek and Latin, and the Waverly influence in his upbringing still stood, sometimes, against his bitterness. Besides, Ben Holladay was something more than big brass. Ben Holladay was the essence

of American individualism and aspiration —an embodiment of the American legend. And, whatever else the years had made of him, Jim Aspinall was American, too. He studied the other covertly.

Sometimes druggist and bartender, turned freighter-trader, this Holladay was, at forty-five, the peer of presidents and industrialists who gave presidents their orders. Belting half a continent with his stage and freight lines, he kept a hundred fast coaches and twenty thousand freight wagons rolling, between the Missouri River and the mountains. Fifteen thousand men called him boss—as many as had followed George Pickett across that mile of bloody ground at Gettysburg. A hundred and fifty thousand high-bred horses wore his brand. His New York mansion had cost a million dollars to build, and a private railroad connected it with the city. A private herd of buffalo grazed its grounds!

This Hollaway was a whole philosophy, a frame of mind. Not Jim Aspinall's philosophy, but certainly the coming thing. Ben Holladay was the future—the new, built out of the wreckage of the old. Jim Aspinall, many years his junior, was the past. And, however young, the past is dead. Is carrion of the future. . . .

THE transportation magnate turned. A slant of light touched the vigorous, virile face, and Jim Aspinall felt old as an Egyptian mummy.

The bold, black eyes were taking his measure, and Aspinall felt that he was being dissected and weighed on scientific scales, each pan of which was dark and bright as a polished shot button. He told himself he had no interest in the assay, that whatever the eyes might conclude would be so much water off his back. Yet, when teeth flashed white through the beard and the stagecoach king came toward him, one hand thrust out in greeting, his voice booming warmly, the soldier thought he had never met a man so winning.

"I'm Ben Holladay. I want to talk to you. Please sit down. I've port and sherry, and cigars are on the desk."

Jim Aspinall refused refreshments, firmly if politely. And he sought the least inviting of the chairs. Even so, the boy with the tear-stained face sat down with him and had to be banished again.

I can stand their cussedness and take their dirt, he thought. It's being treated like a man instead of like an animal that gets me down.

"DO YOU have any idea why you are here?" Ben Holladay asked, when his cigar was lighted.

A very clear idea, Aspinall answered sourly in thought. There was a war, and I was taken prisoner at a place called Gettysburg, and buried alive in a corner of Yankee Hell that is called Elmira, New York. Then your War Department got short of cannon fodder and offered to open the stinking dungeons if we'd put on blue cloth and come west to your frontier posts and fight Indians for our keep. I was young and filled with nonsensical ideas about deserting and rejoining my regiment. Then they stopped the war, and I had no regiment to rejoin. Instead, I was signed up for a three year hitch in an army I had fought from hell to breakfast, with no place to go if I did desert. That's why I'm here. . . .

Aloud, he said, "I'm not in the general's confidence, seh." And he saw laughter kindle in the bright black eyes.

"Nor am I, I'm afraid. I sometimes wish that I were. I have lost a million dollars in horses and equipment in the last two years. Abe Lincoln appealed to my patriotism to keep the mails running, and promised me protection. When I tried to put those promises to work, Connor accused me of trying to use the United States army as my private police force! Now Lincoln's dead, and most of his promises died with him."

None of this was news to Aspinall. But he wondered why Ben Holladay was spending time and breath to review the situation for the benefit of a common soldier.

"Don't misunderstand me," the transportation magnate qualified. "I don't blame Connor for the way things have gone out here. He hasn't had troops enough to act, and such as he's had haven't been worth the name. I warned the War Department against letting men volunteer for frontier duty in the first place, just to escape the draft back east.

I told them the job out here could not be done by draft dodgers and mamma's boys. But no one listened!"

The great man's impatience was exceeded only by his scorn. Jim Aspinall, soldier, could sympathize with neither feeling.

Such things are easy for you to say, never having soldiered, he told the other silently. I've seen things out here that made me proud I was born to the human race. And I've seen things that sickened me to know it. I was at Platte Bridge Station and saw a wagon train attacked within sight of the post. I watched all the garrison officers go on sick call—and saw a visiting nineteen-year-old lieutenant with flags in his eyes volunteer to lead the relieving column. I saw the column desert that boy, who had no business being out with it. I saw him refuse a chance to return to safety, in order to help a wounded trooper. I saw him tortured within full view of the stockade, and no one inside raising a hand to help him. You can't tell me how good and how bad the frontier troops are!

"And now that Connor has reinforcements," the speaker went on, as if accusing Aspinall of the dereliction, "instead of clearing the road, he marches three hundred miles north to fight the raiders' old men and squaws, on the Powder River. I hear that when he mustered for that goosechase, the whole Laramie garrison mutinied. I hear he had to turn his cannon around to get them out of the barracks!"

And what's so reprehensible in that? the soldier thought. Those troops are volunteers. They enlisted for the duration of the war, and the war is over. They want to go home, and I don't blame them. I'd want to go home, if I had a home. You don't know about that part of it. You had a good war, even if you did think you had it rough. You and a lot like you . . .

"And it's not enough that I have ten thousand Cheyenne and Sioux and Arapaho raiding me. There now comes evidence that not all the attackers are red!"

ASPINALL felt a quickening of interest, even though a part of him was smiling the knowing smile. This business of the white renegade was as old as the oldest white settlement on the continent. This was the bogey, the frontier horror tale. For some obscure reason, it was reckoned as more heinous for whites to kill other whites in league with red men than to kill them cleanly, as white to white. Always, the frontier had its killers, its robbers, its cheats. But the word "renegade" was reserved for one who joined red against white.

Jim Aspinall did not wholly share the prejudice. And two years of his life had been dedicated to white-to-white homicide on a scale the Indian could not conceive of. Yet he heard Holladay's allusion to white renegades with an odd fascination.

"Y'u fancy you are dealing with renegades?" he asked quietly.

"There is evidence to support the view," the other rumbled. "A number of wagon trains I've lost were looted clean of their ladings before the vehicles were fired. In addition, a couple of treasure coaches from the mines in the mountains have disappeared utterly.

MAN FROM MISSOURI ASKED TO BE SHOWN!

And He Was! Carl W. Rau Has Now Switched to Calvert Because it Tastes Better.

ST. LOUIS, MO.—Carl W. Rau, Missouri chemical engineer, is no longer a skeptic about the big switch to Calvert. "Friends showed me," he said. "Calvert really does taste better, really is smoother any way you drink it."

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N. Y. C.

"It is not the Indian's custom to obliterate evidence of his crime, Mr. Aspinall. That is a white man's refinement of a very ancient activity. The Indian doesn't strip a wagon train of all its merchandise before he burns it. He gorges himself, takes such loot as he can carry comfortably on horseback, and destroys the rest." Holladay paused for a moment.

Jim Aspinall waited, intrigued but not convinced. Wanting to believe, but fearing to. The transportation magnate noted his skepticism and waved the paper he had been reading.

"I've here in my hand a deposition taken from a teamster who survived the destruction of a train a week ago, on the Medicine Bow. According to the statement, the train's company stood off several hundred kill-crazy reds for almost two days and nights. Then a cavalry column appeared and the reds withdrew. The defenders left their rifle pits and went out to greet their deliverers—and were shot down in cold blood. Afterward, they were scalped, Indian-fashion—by white men wearing the uniform of the United States Army!"

Aspinall felt the hair rise at the back of his neck, and not altogether from horror. "Do you suspect our own cavalry?" he asked.

Ben Holladay looked grim. But he shook his head. "I am out plenty—to the cavalry. They requisition my horses, hay and grain. They commandeer my wagons and harness and supplies, and forget to make records of the transactions—not that it would do any good! But I'm not prepared to believe that even Connor's mutineers and deserters would engage in wholesale murder and land-piracy."

"Then what—?"

"There are a number of theories. Connor favors the idea the raiders are Mormons. But Connor is prejudiced by his feud with Brigham Young. Connor takes the view that Brigham is guilty of the crime they tried to hang Aaron Burr for only dreaming about. But I believe Brigham is loyal."

"Then who would be doing it?" Aspinall pressed, suspense a drag on his heartbeat.

"Mr. Aspinall," the other said somberly, "you may or may not have heard that there is a Confederate army which has not surrendered. General Sterling Price has refused to acknowledge his government's capitulation, and has withdrawn from Arkansas into Texas. Union intelligence reports that he is planning to defend Texas, and possibly Arizona and California, if Confederate sympathizers in those states rise to his support. What more effective method can you conceive of to prepare California for such a coup than to send guerillas north, in Union uniforms, to cut communication and accumulate supplies?"

JIM ASPINALL didn't trust himself to answer. This was the thing he had been hearing persistently for weeks: Rumors that a Confederate army was operating along the Overland. An underground, invisible army. A ghost army of diehards who would not admit that the war had ended.

Aspinall had been inclined to write the rumor off as a product of boredom and wishful thinking on the part of disillusioned turncoats like himself—classing it with the earlier rumors of England's intervention on the side of the South, and with that later Goliath of rumors: That the assassination of Lincoln had been the work of Confederate sympathizers in the North, who had now seized the government. But here, it seemed, was verification. Straight from the horse's mouth!

Jim Aspinall regarded his informant with feverish eyes, and the fever was inflaming the brain behind the eyes. Maybe there was something to it. Maybe the war *wasn't* over. Maybe he could yet trade his blue uniform for gray, and thus vindicate himself after all—in his own eyes, and in the eyes of family and friends who considered his wearing the Union blue an act of abysmal perfidy.

"Why tell me all this?" he asked sharply, his eyes burning in his head. "Why bring me three hundred miles from Laramie in an armored paymaster's wagon, and tell me all this? Where do I fit in?"

Holladay regarded him thoughtfully, and Aspinall averted his eyes, for fear they would betray him. But if the stagecoach king noticed the soldier's fevered appearance, he ascribed it to other things.

"It is my plan to conduct a quiet in-

vestigation of these renegades," he said candidly. "To send out a spy, as you military men would say. And it is my understanding that you are a—a—"

The czar of western transportation and the master of thousands stumbled on a term of cutting villification. And Jim Aspinall smiled bleakly.

"Galvanized Yankee is the term, seh," he said. "We don't mind it. We are called worse things to our faces."

"Well," the other said hastily, "it was in my mind that if we *are* dealing with holdout rebel querillas, then an ex-Confederate soldier who could be trusted would be the best bet for a spy. So I asked Connor for the loan of a reliable Galvanized Yankee"—he returned the appellation with a slight inclination of his head—"and he recommended you as the most soldierly and most trustworthy of the lot."

He should have recommended me, the soldier thought grimly. The Lord knows I worked hard enough for a break like this. From my first day at Laramie, I made myself handy and licked the right boots. I reckoned my chance would come, and I expect it has!

"How do I go about contacting the guerillas?" he asked aloud, scowling to conceal his inner excitement at this incredible turn of events.

"Things have quieted somewhat on the road, as far as Bridger's Pass," the unsuspecting executive said. "And I have considerable mail and express for Fort Steele. I planned to send a coach that far, starting in the morning, and you could accompany it, posing as messenger. If you don't make contact on the trip, you could transfer to one of the swing stations as keeper, and I don't doubt they'd call on you soon. If you do make contact—well, we had better leave that to your own inventiveness. Now tell me frankly how the project impresses you."

"It is a chance I have been dreaming about," the Southerner said fervently, altogether truthfully. "With any luck, I should redeem myself of past mistakes."

"You succeed in turning up these devils, and you can name your own reward!" the stagecoach king promised warmly. "Right now, you had better get out of that uniform and into company garb. I'll give you a note and they'll fix you up at our warehouse. When you get lined out, return here, and I'll brief you a bit on company business and the duties of a Holladay messenger. You'll need to be convincing, you know. I don't even want anyone here in Denver to be suspicious of you."

"No one will be suspicious of me!" Jim Aspinall declared, at once grim and exuberant. "Not till it is too late!"

CHAPTER TWO

High Salary Driver

THE Holladay coaches were Abbot-Downing vehicles, manufactured at Concord, New Hampshire. Their cost ranged from one thousand dollars to fifteen hundred dollars, depending on the model, and the money was wisely invested.

The coach which left Denver that early summer morning was one of the finest on the line. The body was of white oak, painted brilliant red with black striping, mounted on a straw-colored chassis by means of strong leather thorough braces.

The wheels were wide-rimmed, and above the brake-shoes were boxes equipped with sand for emergency wet-weather stopping. The ornate body was equipped with kerosene side lamps and large candle lights inside. There were adjustable leather curtains at the windows, and a spring seat for the driver and the guard.

The road out of the territorial capital was in good condition, and to Jim Aspinall —accustomed to the deadly jolting of the Army vehicles—this was like riding on a cloud.

"As long as you are bait for renegades, we'll make you a tempting prize!" the stagecoach king had told him. And, to Aspinall's notion, the outfit would tempt a king.

The coach was drawn by four matched dapple gray trotters, valued at three hundred dollars each, according to the records he had examined the night before. All harness used on the line was the famous "Hill" brand which retailed in Concord for one hundred and fifty dollars the set. Even the driver, one Long Tom Haley, was one of the inner circle of long-time

Holladay employees—a sort of secret society, membership in which conferred much privilege and much responsibility to the line and to "Ol' Ben," as Holladay was known to men many years his junior.

For Ben Holladay was lavish to the point of folly when it came to his stage line. But, as a showman, he had the Barnum touch. He called his drivers "jehus" for the headlong Biblical king *(and the driving is like the driving of Jehu the son of Nimshi, for he driveth furiously!*—II Kings, ix:20), and he saw to it that they dressed in spectacular fashion: Flat-crowned black sombrero, red shirt, corduroy pants trimmed in velvet, and ornate high-heeled boots. The handles of their nine-foot rawhide whips were inlaid with Mexican silver, as were the metal parts of their pistols. And no matter how jaded a team might be, no matter how much a jehu must pamper them out on the road, his entrance into each station must be accompanied by flying gravel and snarling whip, to give an impression of break-neck speed.

So much Jim Aspinall had gleaned from the records and from hobnobbing with Holladay employees the night before. And he would learn considerably more, through the day, from Long Tom, who sat like a king on his high spring seat, shocking the morning air with the innumerable and unprintable verses of the Holladay version of *High Salary Driver of the Denver City Line:*

"You ask me for our leader;
I'll soon inform you, then.
It's Holladay they call him,
And often only Ben.
Now if you read the papers,
It's easy for to scan.
He beats the world in staging,
Or any other man!"

Holladay's business rivals, as Aspinall had it, regarded him as something less than a philanthropist. But men who served him found him a prince of masters—so long as they served him well. Men who failed him, or betrayed him, found the course of failure or treachery a short and profitless one.

But Aspinall was not now concerned with thoughts like these. You have to catch before you kill, and Jim Aspinall was free! He was out of the hated uniform, and was traveling in style toward a rendezvous with fortune in the form of Price's unsurrendered Butternuts! The tawny plains, once hateful and hostile as gray stone walls, now were vast with freedom, the distant mountains bright with promise. Mountains Jim Aspinall would know intimately, soon.

It was only now coming home to him, this incredible turn of the Aspinall luck. He thought of the fetid air in the caves at Elmira, and he thought of the soul-starving boredom, the insufferable ignominy of life at Laramie. He was uplifted with a kind of insane joy. He wanted to stand up and shout to the prairies and to the luminous mountains. Instead, he joined in the chorus of *The High Salary Driver*—outshouting the jehu, Long Tom Haley:

"Statesmen and warriors,
Traders and the rest
May boast of their professions
And think they are the best.
Their taste I'll never envy,
I'll have you understand,
As long as I'm a driver
On the Jolly Overland!"

TEN miles an hour on the rocking, bucking box. Fresh horses every twelve to eighteen miles, here where the hostiles hadn't been. Child's Ranch, and Boone's. Little Thompson. Big Thompson. Laporte and Bouer and Cherokee. Stations and swing stations on the Overland Route. Beads of log and 'dobe, strung on twin strands of dust. Fifty stations between Atchison and Denver; forty-seven between Denver and Salt Lake. Station attendants swarming over them. Kowtowing and begging news and reading matter. Switching teams and doping hot axles. Waving them on with dark warnings of trouble up ahead.

Virginia Dale by nightfall. One hundred miles in ten hours!

"Why, mister, that ain't nothing. Year ago, I drove Ol' Ben fifteen miles in fifty-five minutes! Ben bet Bela Hughes he could travel overland from coast to coast faster'n them steamers could make it, by way o' Panama. And he done it. Eight days from Salt Lake to Atchison. Mister,

that ain't no lie. Shore he pays money for his horses. But costive horses that get away are cheaper than cheap horses full of Injun arrows!"

Virginia Dale by nightfall . . .

Virginia Dale, the southerner rehearsed in his mind. Named for the beautiful wife of its first agent, Jack Slade, who turned wolf and was hanged for his crimes while his wife pleaded for his life. Largest settlement between Denver and Fort Bridger. Home of Bob Spotswood, superintendent of the Denver-Fort Steele subdivision. . . .

By sundown they had brought it into view: A pleasant looking hamlet in a mountain valley where the Laramie and Medicine Bow ranges came together. There was no stockade, but the warehouses and many corrals were shrewdly located, the southerner noted, to render the settlement easily held. Long Tom Haley, true to tradition, whipped up his flagging team, and the coach rolled in on smoking axles. A crowd of attendants and soldiers and temporary residents in civilized dress had formed to welcome the first coach through from Denver in two weeks.

Jim Aspinall heard the cheering and saw the eager, up-turned faces in the early dusk. He left the jehu to bask in the crowd's approbation and sought out the subdivision agent.

Spotswood, a small, forthright individual, was the one person at the station who took a dim view of the coach's arrival. "Has Ol' Ben lost his grip?" he burst out, hearing that the coach was bound for Steele. "I'd liefer start you for the moon. We're all right here, so far. But everything north is burned for seventy miles. Not a thing this side of Rock Creek."

"Give me mules," the southerner said. "Eight head of mules will take me seventy miles."

"Not my mules!" the agent said. "Besides, you wouldn't get seven miles, with your hair intact."

"Ben Holladay said—"

"Ben don't run this subdivision—till he fires me. I'm paid to do the job, and I do it. I don't throw mules and coaches away. Keep your shirt on, mister. If it's excitement you crave, you'll get a bellyful at Virginia Dale."

Spotswood didn't know and wasn't to know Aspinall's identity or the nature of his mission. Holladay had been emphatic on that point. And Aspinall saw opportunity slipping through his fingers.

"Y'u mean," he demanded edgily, "that you're going to hold me and that coach here—indefinitely?"

"I'm holding the coach," the agent said shortly. "Where you go is your affair."

And he left Jim Aspinall talking to himself.

Ridden by disaffection shot through with despair, the southerner turned back toward the coach. He was a hundred miles from Denver—and military slavery. But a hundred miles was not enough. Maybe Long Tom Haley would permit personal loyalty to Holladay to over-ride his reason, and stand with Aspinall in this. The drivers were looked on as gods by the lesser personnel. Haley, if he would, could bribe a hostler. They could get a team without the agent's knowledge or approval.

BUT by the time he'd returned to the coach, the hostlers had the team unhitched, the clerks had removed the mail and express to the office inside the hostelry, and Long Tom had repaired to the tavern beside the hotel, surrounded by news-hungry admirers. Aspinall swore in rising impatience. But he put down an impulse to shoulder his way through the crowd and put his proposition to the jehu flatly.

Long Tom was in his glory, in there. Besides, in the Holladay system, no jehu was permitted to drive more than a hundred miles. In rougher country, drivers were changed every fifty or sixty miles. Only the messenger was required to traverse the whole division without rest—husbanding his mail and express cargo from one terminus to the next. Six days on and five days off.

Long Tom Haley would not be party to his scheme. If he knew the relay driver . . . But he did not. He was busted at Virginia Dale.

He followed the hostlers to the corrals, without definite purpose, and stood in the gathering gloom, beating at the invisible walls that hemmed him in, fighting the sense of failure that oppressed him. He

told himself that he was out of uniform, and free—for a time at least. But he couldn't escape the knowledge that such freedom was conditional and wouldn't last. And the chances of contacting Price's raiders at a place as strongly held as this were microscopic. He could steal a horse, perhaps, and ride on, alone. But if Spotswood had told the truth he would be dead and scalped and disemboweled long before the diehard rebels knew there was a new recruit in the wilderness.

"I—I beg your pardon—"

The voice which intruded on his bleak preoccupation was clear and well rounded, as feminine as ringlets and lockets and soft silk things. Aspinall turned and saw a small starched shape—small-waisted, ruffled, heart-faced. A shape as familiar and as haunting as the carpeted, chandeliered room.

For an instant the southerner stared. It seemed incredible that such a shape should be here, so deep in the wilderness, so far from chandeliers, honeysuckle and banjo moons. He blinked his eyes, and the shape was still there, and he remembered the stage passengers, marooned in the way-stations.

"Yes, ma'am?" he said, removing his hat. He tried to see her face. But the gloom and the effacing poke of her bonnet concealed it.

"You came in on the coach?"

He listened to the voice, not the words. It was a lovely voice, a little thin, but clear as the tone of a silver bell. It wasn't a southern voice. But few voices were, any more.

"The coach?" he inquired softly. "Yes, ma'am. I am the messenger."

"When will it be going west?"

"As soon as I can arrange it," he said fervently. "Will you be a passenger?"

"I hope to be," the bonnet said. "There are so many of us here! But my father and I should receive early consideration. We have been here nearly three weeks."

So you have a father! Aspinall thought sagely. That would mean, ordinarily, no husband. Maybe life at Virginia Dale would be tolerable, after all.

Then he remembered who he was, and why he was here, and his bitterness rose up with the memory. Life at Virginia Dale would *not* be tolerable. Life itself would not be tolerable until he made contact with those he sought. This girl held no interest for him. But, perhaps—

"It was my intention to drive straight through to Steele," he said stiffly. "Mister Spotswood refused tonight to grant me clearance. But the coach and the horses are here. Perhaps you and your father—and the others—might persuade him to change his mind."

"We shall try," the girl promised. "And I thank you very much."

Don't thank me, the southerner told her silently. Thanks will be due you if you pry that coach loose!

He bowed slightly and she turned to leave. As she did so, the stirring breeze brought him a faint breath of orchids—and a nullifying thought. With a passenger like that girl on board, how could he turn the coach over to renegades?

That's a bridge you can cross when you come to it, he told himself. The coach hasn't been let loose, yet.

And he stood looking after the small but eye-filling hour-glass shape. Watching it blend softly into the gathering night. Throttling an impulse to follow and continue the conversation, enlarging a chance meeting into an acquaintance. Trying to analyze and thus to dispel an intuitive and unreasoned conviction that this accidental and insignificant meeting had somehow interfered with and altered the course of his plans. His very life.

SLOWLY, discontentedly, he turned toward the tavern. As he neared it, resolving on a temporary shelving of his worries, the door banged open and a man came through it, staggering slightly. Something in the cut of him, something in the shuffling carriage, stirred an old antagonism in Aspinall's mind. The thought took shape that he knew the man. Yet he could not place him.

The figure reeled through the door and came toward him, head down, shoulders sloping loosely, feet swinging wide, describing circular, horse-like steps on the graveled path. "Horse Hooper!" the southerner exclaimed in an undertone, a door in his memory opening to that odd, inimitable gait.

Then he doubted the reliability of his eyes. Horse Hooper, a lick-spittle in-

former at Elmira, had come west with Aspinall, a Galvanized Yankee who'd deserted en route and had been reported dead. How could he be here, at Virginia Dale?

"Horse!" the southerner called softly.

The lumbering figure halted. The sloping shoulders drew back. The heavy head lifted. Jim Aspinall saw the familiar stupid face and crafty eyes, and knew then that this was real.

The other regarded him drunkenly through the gloom. Then, abruptly, he uttered a hoarse cry of fright, and fled—floundering in the dark. Aspinall called after him but the fugitive only ran the harder, and the southerner set out after him.

The fool! he thought. What does he think he has to fear from me?

Pursued and pursuer rounded the tavern and wove between warehouses and stables. At last the deserter ducked into an open stable door, and Aspinall followed, finding nothing but darkness and silence and a sensation of threatening danger.

"Horse," he called softly. "It's me. Jim Aspinall. Where are y'u?"

"Here," a voice said heavily at his ear.

Aspinall started to turn. But darkness fell in upon him and he forgot what he was doing.

THE darkness still weighed on him when he awoke. It filled his eyes and nose and mouth, along with the dust and stable nitrates. It bound his hands and his legs in nightmare sloth, and he could not move or cry out. The oppression and restraint filled him with a nameless and unreasoned horror that had nothing to do with memory or knowledge of his real predicament. It was the nightmare that he dreaded, knowing even that it was nothing more than nightmare. He must break out of its suffocating web or be smothered by the weightless vampire wings that pinioned him, helpless under the poised beak.

For a time he struggled frenziedly and futilely. Pain began to skewer his head. Hot, nauseating pain—as shocking, as unbearable as toothache. The onslaught wrested a groan from him. His ears registered the sound. He had heard it plainly! He groaned again and heard it once more. And rationality began to penetrate fog in which he threshed. The sound was real, as was the pain. He would have to be conscious or neither sound nor pain could reach him!

The realization beat off the smothering horror, and thought processes began to mesh again. He wasn't asleep. He was awake. He couldn't move or see. But he could feel. He could hear! He might be blinded, paralyzed. But he was conscious.

The knowledge was strangely comforting. He ceased his struggles and the pain in his head lessened. Memory came back. Memory of Horse Hooper and the stable falling in. He still could not move. But, when he tried, he felt a pressure at his wrists and ankles. He wasn't paralyzed. He was tied!

Bathed in the sweat of relief, he relaxed and tried again to think. He couldn't think. But the relief continued. He was bound, gagged and helpless. Maybe blind. But he was in control of his

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mind again. And however unnerving the facts of reality, they at least could be identified and grappled with. Horrors of the known were wholesome and paltry when compared with horrors of the dark. . . .

The relief was still bathing him in cool waves when he heard the footsteps—and voices. Voices that struck a responsive chord down in the fibers of his soul. For they were voices of his native South, rich with the richness of black swamp soil. The sun-touched, sun-riped voices. The voices of Fair Oaks and Seven Pines and Malvern Hill.

The fear that the voices would pass him by was tinctured with the nightmare dread. But a line of light appeared beneath a door near him and he knew then he wasn't blinded. Knew that the voices were coming to where he lay.

Then the door creaked open and the light came in. It was a lantern and its dull red glow showed him three men. One was Horse Hooper. The others were men he had not seen before.

"Buck," the man who held the light was saying, "you wait by the do' in case some jack has tagged us. Hawse, block that hole. Lights draw Yanks like bugs. Now, wheah's this ringtail cat you treed?"

"Yondah on the flo'," Horse Hooper said, faintly bragging. "I hit him with a grain bin."

"Y'u stopped hittin' him too quick!" the other commented, holding the light close to Aspinall's face. "Fo' a dead Yank he looks right smart."

I'm not a Yank, Aspinal tried desperately to say. I'm a Southern Rebel, looking for Price's guerillas. But the gag was in his mouth, and the only sound that came from him was a muffled, nasal groan.

"Don't take on so, Jack!" the man above him said. "We got nothing' again' y'u, pusonal, even if y'u did tu'n Yank on us. You jus' stumbled inta somethin', that's all, croppin' up just neow, at Vi'ginia Dale!"

A TWO-PRONGED comprehension was breaking inside the southerner's head. These men were guerilla spies, Trojan horsemen, inside the enemy camp; and they regarded him as an enemy, not as a friend. They were taking Horse Hooper's word on him. They believed he had actually gone over to the Yanks and was a threat to whatever plans they had made, involving Virginia Dale.

He looked up at the face of the man who stood over him, the man who seemed to be in authority. He felt himself drawn to him, as steel is drawn to magnetized steel. It was a young face, as young as his own, yet lined and unnaturally old. It was a blunt face, reckless and cherubic and bold. But the lines at the mouth and eyes were not laugh lines, as they should have been. The black eyes themselves were as cruel as eyes he had seen in zoos.

The eyes turned away. The voice fell upon his ears again. "He'll have to be done away with—but he cain't just disappeah without causin' some folks to wondah. Hmm. Hawse, you an' Buck take him daown to the branch, an' draown him. Then untie him. Leave his haid in the watah, an' spill booze on him. Make it look accidental!"

The black eyes turned and looked down at him again. Jim Aspinall knew then that they were going to kill him without giving him a chance to talk. He struggled again against his bonds. But the ropes only cut deeper into his flesh. He groaned and made frantic protesting sounds through his gag. But his captors were not impressed, and he realized with a sinking feeling that they regarded his protests as a natural reaction of one who has heard himself condemned.

They were not going to give him a chance to tell why he was here. He could see them, hear them. But he could not communicate with them. The vampire was at his throat again. This was the nightmare, come to life. This was the real thing—the horror of the dark, but based on cold, certain knowledge. . . .

* * *

Later, when the black-eyed man had gone, Horse Hooper sent the man called Buck down to the stream to reconnoiter. "Make damn' shore nobody's a skulkin' around that might see us. I'll stay an' keep a eye on the remains."

But it developed quickly that the deserter had had another reason for wanting his accomplice out of the stall. An-

other reason for remaining behind himself. As quick as the door had closed on his colleague, Hooper was on his knees beside the southerner.

"You ain't a-goin' to need what's in yo' pockets!" he snarled when Aspinall's eyes captured his own reluctant gaze. "I'd mought as well have it as any!"

His fingers took quick inventory of his victim's pockets, grunting when he found the wallet at Aspinall's hip.

Aspinall, about to be robbed of life, was not perturbed about the lesser robbery. But he rebelled savagely against the larger thing that was happening. Not against the prospect of death itself so much as against the stupidity and uselessness of death. He looked at his executioner and saw that he was holding the wallet to the lamplight, taking inventory of the contents. The dull face was momentarily averted and Aspinall saw one forlorn chance.

Inhaling deeply, he braced himself against the pain in his head, and lifted his bound legs, drawing his knees up under his chin. He knew that there would be no other chance, that this one must suffice. He bit down hard against the rag between his teeth, pushed all his strength downward into his bent legs and straightened them with an effort that left him temporarily blind. Still, he had a half-formed impression of the deserter turning sharply, warned by his animal instincts, or something he had heard. Turning fully into the savage, double-barreled kick that Aspinall uncorked at his head.

HE FELT the shock of the impact up in his knees, as his heavy bootheels smashed the face. He felt the give of the flesh and of the bone beneath. He heard a muffled *snap*, like the cracking of a stick wrapped in a heavy quilt. He knew Horse Hooper was dead, even before he opened his eyes and saw him lying oddly crumpled in the lantern light, neck grotesquely twisted, a look of surprise frozen on the horse-like countenance.

It exhausted the southerner's ingenuity and remaining strength to roll to the body of the man he had killed, work the knife out of the case he wore at his belt and cut the ropes that bound his hands behind his back. It required an eternity of time, as well. Time that would run out as quick as the man called Buck returned from his scout of the branch. But he managed it, and when he heard returning footsteps, his hands and his feet were free. He didn't feel strong enough to depend on the borrowed knife, and a gun was out of the question. But, before he blew out the stinking lantern, he saw a heavy hickory harness hame hanging on a nail above his head.

He was ready when the scout pushed open the door to the box stall, and hesitated, finding it dark.

"You in theah, Hawse?" the scout whispered hoarsely.

The southerner marked the man's position by the sound of his voice, and struck.

Some minutes later, he left the black place of death and near-death, armed with a captured knife and pistol. But the nightmare accompanied him. The weightless, intangible restraints. The panicking helplessness.

The men behind him were harmless now. Harmless for the rest of time. But their bodies would be discovered, as soon as Black Eyes got to wondering at their absence. When they were discovered, Jim Aspinall would be hunted down like an animal. He couldn't go to Spotswood, and he couldn't flee the station. He couldn't fight the men whose organization he had come there to join. Yet to do nothing was to wait for certain death, at the hands of the very men whose confidence and friendship he must win.

If I could find the black-eyed so-and-so, he thought in rising desperation, I might get the drop on him and make him listen to me. The fact that I didn't go to Spotswood ought to count for me. But how can I find him when I don't know his name or even what he's acting out to be here? Besides, I've got to keep out of sight. I don't know who's loyal here, and who's with Black Eyes. Any his guerillas see me before I talk with him, I'll never have a chance. . . .

But the problem, hopeless as it was, seemed academic in the end. Keeping to shadow and avoiding all who moved about the station in the dark, he had made his way as far as the clapboard hotel. But he knew that this was the end of the trail. The pain was back in his head and the

lighted windows about the station were gyrating crazily around him. He could go no farther. This was it.

He found the porch that ran the full width of the hotel's front, and dragged himself up the lurching steps. Twice he remembered falling. But he was still on his feet. It seemed that if he could get inside, he might hide. Might continue to live. But the door was a million rolling miles away. . . .

Then hands came out of nowhere to help him. Hands that smelled of orchids. A soft, clear voice that was familiar yet couldn't be placed was speaking in his ear.

"You're hurt. Let me help you!"

"Got to hide!" he mumbled, trying to shake off the hands. "They want to kill me. Got to hide—"

But the darkness closed over him, then. Over him and the soft hands, too. Then he was free of the hands. He was alone in the whirling dark. He was spiraling down and down, into a void where no light penetrated. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Conspiracy

FOR an endless space of time Aspinall lay in a pit of soundless gloom penetrated by flashes of delirium and pain. Strange, disconnected visions floated before his eyes. Images which were so much a part of the pain that he failed to differentiate one from the other and came to shrink from the visions as from pain itself.

Sometimes it was the face of his father, buried a hero after Antietam, a major-general, CSA. Sometimes it was his mother, aged with privation and grief, looking at him with troubled eyes which did not condemn but did not understand. Sometimes it was Ben Holladay, eyes bright and black and measuring. But most often it was Black Eyes of the stable. Black Eyes, atop a round glass hill beside a flag of the Confederacy. Aspinall was trying to climb that hill but kept slipping back. He had the feeling that if he could shout to Black Eyes and get his attention, Black Eyes would throw him a rope. But he had no voice, and he kept slipping back into a deep whirling black void. . . .

Sometimes the vision was a lovely girl with hair as radiant as light and eyes as purple as lupine. His sick brain did not link this face with pain but with coolness that blunted the edge of pain. He came to await the appearance of the sun-touched face, and to fret for it feverishly when it failed to appear.

At still other times the face was that of Spotswood. Spotswood shaking his head. Spotswood standing between him and a coach where Black Eyes sat with his father, waiting. Spotswood saying, hollowly, If it's excitement you crave, you'll get a bellyful, here at Virginia Dale. . . .

Then one day he awakened from his bloodshot dream to find himself in a poster bed, in a wallpapered room, with potted flowers on a table beside his bed. For a time he lay still, wondering how he came to be back home, after so many years, lying late abed.

Then, as memory began to fill his mind, the door opened, and into the room came the girl of his fevered dreams. He looked at her, unable to speak—thinking that this was fancy again. But the vision smiled and spoke, and Aspinall began to comprehend that this was real.

"So you have decided to live, after all! We thought, for a time, that we wouldn't be bothered with you long!"

But, again, he listened to the voice, not the words. It was the voice that he had heard that night by the stagecoach, asking him for passage west. It was the voice that had caught him when he fell, out on the hotel steps.

"What am I doing here, in this bed?" he asked with an effort that sent the pain back into his swollen head.

"I found you down on the porch, clinging to one of the posts. I helped you up here, and got my father, who is a doctor. He patched your head and we cleaned you up and got you into bed."

"How—how long ago was that?"

"Three days. You've been very sick."

Three days, he thought. And I'm still alive.

"Who all knows I'm here?"

"Only myself and my father—and Mr. and Mrs. Spotswood. When I found you, you were mumbling about someone hunting you, wanting to kill you. And, from

the looks of you, they had almost succeeded. I mentioned it to Mr. Spotswood, and since we had no idea who it might be, until you could talk, we decided to keep you a secret. One of us has been with you all the time. Mrs. Spotswood helped."

JIM ASPINALL was silent a time. He was seeing now why the guerillas hadn't hunted him down. They must have thought he'd fled the station, not knowing his incapacity. He saw, too, the size of the debt he owed this girl and her father and Bob Spotswood. But he couldn't think of that now.

He lifted a hand to his throbbing head and found it swathed in bandage. "How bad am I hurt?" he asked faintly.

"Slight fracture of a very hard skull," she told him lightly. "Concussion and fever of the brain. My father relieved the pressure by removing some of the bone. He says you'll live if you stay quiet a month or so."

A month or so! Aspinall made a grimace that hurt his head. He had an idea that in much less time than that he would either be dead or riding high with Price and his guerillas.

"So, if you try to get up," she went on cheerfully, "I'll find whoever it was that hit you and have them hit you again!"

"If you do that," the southerner said miserably, beginning to wish that he had been killed, "have them do it good."

"Is it as bad as that?" she asked gently.

"It's as bad as that!" he confirmed crossly.

The girl looked at him solicitously, and the purple eyes held such tenderness and concern that he writhed in unbearable torment, born of guilt. His eyes lowered.

"I don't even know your name," he said.

"It's Annabelle Rutledge," she told him. "I live in California. I've been east with my father to visit my brother who is in a hospital with war wounds."

Annabelle Rutledge. He tried the name on his lips and found it pleasing. It seemed to go well with purple eyes and sunlit hair.

He felt he should thank her for all she'd done for him. But something restrained him. Some hard core of stubbornness or integrity, some inherent sense of proportion, rebelled at the irony: Thanking her for saving his life so that he might join the raiders who no doubt were planning to destroy the station, bringing ruin to all within it.

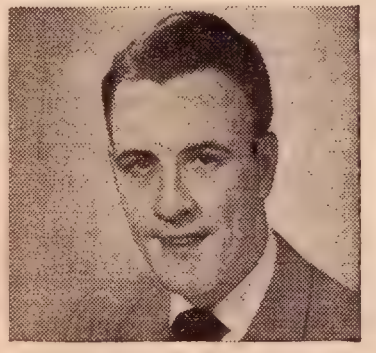
"Mr. Spotswood is anxious to talk with you," he heard her say. "I'll go bring him now."

He started to object. Then he saw that it was coming sometime and might as well be now. He would think of a lie to explain the fight and maybe Black Eyes would hear of the lie and know that he was friend, not foe. . . .

His mind must have slipped back then into the murk from which it had so shortly emerged. Because, the next he knew, Spotswood was standing over him, speaking in a voice that seemed unnecessarily loud and insistent.

"Hello, there. Glad to see you come around. What happened to you, man?"

Aspinall had meant to think up something likely. But his brain had gone truant and his mind was a blank. To cover his hesitance he pretended feigned



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continued grogginess, and let his eyes blear around the room, seeing that several men had come in with Spotswood. Then he started, and for a second or two did not have to pretend that he was stunned. For among those at the agent's back was Black Eyes himself. Standing somewhat apart, his hand inside his coat. His cold eyes were on Aspinall, hurling a warning and a threat.

Aspinall could not fathom what his presence meant—unless he were someone in Spotswood's confidence who might have been with the agent when the girl brought the news that the sleeping beauty had wakened. Black Eyes could not have known of his presence in that room all along, or he would have done something about it in the three days in which he'd had to act.

Aspinall guessed that there was a pistol inside the raider's coat, guessed that the guerilla would open the ball here and now if Aspinall tried to spill the truth. The man was waiting, apparently hoping that Aspinall had not recognized him. And the southerner's first consternation turned to satisfaction. His luck was holding good. The man's presence here during his interview with Spotswood gave Aspinall opportunity to demonstrate to him just where he stood.

BOB SPOTSWOOD was repeating his question patiently, as to a man whose understanding might be clouded. Aspinall looked back at him and answered.

"After I had talked to you that night, I walked back to the coach. A man came out of the tavern that I recognized. A deserter from Laramie. I spoke to him and he ran. I followed him into a stable. He jumped me in there. He and another. I fought them in the dark. I got knocked down. But I got away."

Spotswood was watching him intently. "The girl said you were afraid someone was following you, wanting to kill you. Who were you afraid of?"

There was the question. Aspinall felt, or thought he felt, a silence of suspense come in the room. He couldn't resist darting a glance at Black Eyes and he saw the raider was cocked like the gun inside his coat. The black eyes were the eyes of a snake poised to strike. Aspinall admitted a glint to come into his own eyes. He even risked a wink, with one eye which was visible to the guerilla alone. Then he answered, briefly.

"I told y'u, there were two of them. They tried to kill me in the barn. I didn't think they'd let me get away."

Spotswood made no effort to conceal his relief—and his exasperation. "And I thought you were still in danger! I kept a guard over you, man!"

"There were two of them," Aspinall repeated stubbornly, pretending not to understand. "They wanted my life, to keep me quiet."

"They got something they didn't want then!" the agent exclaimed with relish. "They weren't only dead when we found them. They looked like they'd been caught by stampeding buffalo!"

There was added talk. Idle talk, jocular and admiring relating to Aspinall's capacities for mayhem and self-defense. Then Spotswood introduced his companions. First was Dr. Will Rutledge, a distinguished looking man of fifty, whom Aspinall thanked for professional services rendered. Last was Black Eyes, whose gaze plunged into Aspinall's like iron, whose hand was hard as a talon.

"And this is Anthon Wilkes. Mr. Wilkes deals in buffalo hides and tongues. He and his hunters took refuge with us when the Sioux destroyed their camp. We are glad to have their company until things quiet down."

Aspinall didn't smile. He didn't feel like smiling. But he had to look at the irony of the situation. He couldn't help wondering how glad Spotswood would be to have the hunters inside the station when the attack was joined.

Later, when the group departed—Dr. Rutledge prescribing immediate rest for his daughter, and escorting her from the room—the man called Wilkes lingered. When all had gone outside and the door had slammed behind them, the raider closed the door to Aspinall's room and stepped close to the bed. A pistol was in his hand and his black eyes were cold.

"Just what's yo' game, friend?" he demanded in a tone as cold as his eyes. "Speak, an' speak plain."

"Gladly," Aspinall breathed. And he told his story. Told it in detail. Why

he'd taken the oath to serve the Union, why he had worked well at Laramie instead of deserting. How he had been sent north to investigate the reports of white raiders on the Overland. How he wished only to join the raiders, and—eventually—General Price.

The black eyes gleamed at mention of Price. But, otherwise, eyes and face were impassive. When Aspinall had finished, the raider looked at him a time in silence. Then he walked to the window and stood looking out.

"It appeahs I made a mistake," he said quietly, at last. "That fool Hoopah is well gone. I do need men. But how do I know I can trust y'u? Y'u change sides a bit often fo' my taste."

"No oftener than Hooper!" Aspinall argued desperately. "And I've told y'u why. And as far as trusting me goes, if I didn't stand with you, wouldn't I have told Spotswood a bit more of what I know about you?"

"It would appeah so," the raider conceded. "Mo' yet to the point, y'u now know too much, an' I cain't kill you, conveniently, without touchin' off the fight. I now have men enough heah in the station to do the job. But I've promised to wait fo' my Injun allies."

So it's to be done with Indian aid, Aspinall thought with a sinking feeling.

"So,"—the other turned. "We'll let it go at that, fo' now. We will regawd y'u as one of us, an' treat y'u accawdingly. But let me wawn y'u. You will be watched. One slip, one leak of infawmation, an' you will have the honah of bein' the fust to die!"

Again the black eyes plunged into Aspinall's like daggers. Aspinall was not daunted. But he found himself losing his enthusiasm for the project.

HE DISCOVERED that he could block out the swart face and glowing eyes by closing his own eyes. But lowered lids would not block out the pictures which the drawling words conjured up in his fancy. He opened his eyes and looked at the face again, wondering how he could ever have been attracted to it.

"What happens to the noncombatants?" he asked, forcing the question out of him. "The women—and the others?"

The black eyes quickened, and something darkling crossed the oily face. Something evil and malignant and stark.

"What happened to noncombatants at Vicksbu'g, when Grant came? At Atlanta, when She'man took it? Or did you evah heah?"

Aspinall nodded reluctantly. He *had* heard. And he understood the hungry hatred that looked out of the shoe-button eyes. He understood it because he shared it. And, yet—

"That war is—different," he mumbled impotently. He had started to say "ended." And he was puzzled and somewhat alarmed that his tongue would try to speak that lie. For there was little enough to live for as long as he refused to believe it. If ever he started to believe it, there would be nothing at all to live for.

"Wa' is nevah different!" the guerilla said in a voice that rattled. "An' if yo' is with us, yu'll have to get yo'self up off that feathah-bed mighty soon. Fo' we don't have long to wait."

Aspinall heard, and did not hear. He was familiar with the usual treatment accorded female captives by savage war parties. And the thought of handing the purple-eyed girl over to Black Eyes' red allies, as part of the spoils of combat, was too untenable to be considered. Yet when the guerilla had taken his leave and he was left to the mercy of his thoughts, he found he must consider it. Must consider the girl, and his debt to her, and to Mrs. Spotswood and the others. Must consider what lay ahead for them if Black Eyes' plan carried. What lay ahead for him if the plan failed.

He found also that he must consider himself, in light of this latest cruel trick that life had played on him: Opening the way to atonement for an earlier mistake. Promising him reparation for an earlier, insufferable hoax. Then—when reparation was almost in his hand—lowering the boom like a triphammer. Blocking the path to vindication with a conscience and a pair of purple eyes.

"I'll have to think of an angle," he said miserably aloud. "I can't think now. I'll have to wait till my head will let me think."

But he knew that he couldn't wait long. . . .

BY SUNDOWN Jim Aspinall could suffer idleness no longer. The girl didn't return. And though he shrank from the thought of facing her again, the fear that some harm might have befallen her needled him into activity. Ignoring the protest from his bandaged head, he swung his feet to the floor and stood up experimentally. When the first dizziness had passed he walked to the bureau that stood against the wall, pulled open a drawer and found his clothes freshly laundered and pressed.

You'd better get away from this place, and quick! he told himself. Much more of this and you wouldn't ever want to leave.

Dressing, unassisted, was arduous labor. But he persisted, and got the job done. Then he located his pistols in another drawer, dropped them into the pockets of his jacket, and—with the wall to aid him—made his way down the steep stairs.

The evening air on the porch was fresh and sweet with the ripe smells of summer. He sat alone on the bench beside the door, inhaling deeply and recalling the smells of another land, in another time. Off to the west and north, smoke was fingering up the sky in long, tenuous columns. He could guess what that smoke portended, and he wondered if Spotswood and his crew were blind that they did not see those signs.

He knew, behind thought, that he should have found the defenders' torpor a source of satisfaction, everything considered. But, instead, he sensed a rising impatience for men so derelict in duty. Ben Holladay, it seemed, deserved better backing from his staff.

After a time the purple-eyed girl came out of the cookhouse, carrying a covered tray. Aspinall watched her, held by an odd suspense. When she turned from the main walk and started up the hotel path he was torn between triumph and an impulse to flee.

He didn't flee. And, watching her approach, he was able to see his position more clearly. Able to reduce his dilemma to a least common denominator and view the various factors with a measure of objectivity.

He had come to Virginia Dale to renew the war which some said was over, and thereby to vindicate himself for having gone over to the enemy. That purpose had not been shaken. But it was becoming clouded. And he believed he saw why.

War at its best was savagery. But war was impersonal. Except in the heat of close-in combat, when all minds were mercifully mad, the artilleryman did not witness at first hand the results of his barrage, the bombardier did not have to watch the unfolding of the packaged hell in which he dealt. Each had a mere routine to fill, and only the routine was personal. That was why wars were possible.

The trouble here was that a personal angle was being thrust in. Jim Aspinall owed his life to this girl and her doctor-father, and could not see them slaughtered, war or no war. The difficulty might even go deeper than that, though he wasn't yet prepared to admit it.

Whatever the philosophical ramifications, life had played one brutal joke on Jim Aspinall, and unless he watched his step now, he could really get one hung on him.

THE girl halted at the top of the wooden steps and looked at him sternly. "My father has been afraid that he removed too much bone from your head. I would say that he didn't remove enough! Don't you want to live?"

"Not unless that tray is for me," Aspinall told her. And when she smiled, his senses were jarred, as if he'd stopped a fist.

"I brought it, hoping it would improve your disposition," she said, still scolding. "But if you've decided not to live, I suppose it's food wasted."

He watched her as she uncovered the tray and poured the tea. He noted the whiteness of her skin, the firmness of the flesh underneath. The bones of her face were small and well-molded even when examined at close range. The dusting of freckles on her nose was, for no reason he could justify, very feminine. Very exciting.

Jim Aspinall had been brought up on the notion that southern women had a

corner on the charm and beauty of their sex. Now he began to judge the notion as somewhat narrow.

Better slow up! he warned himself. Remember who you are and why you're here.

But he found it difficult to remember when the girl looked up.

"I want to thank y'u for what you've done for me," he said, forgetting that he had not meant to do this.

"You could thank me best by taking care of yourself," she answered. "Your head really is broken."

"No great loss!" the southerner grumbled, seeing that things here at Virginia Dale were becoming very personal indeed.

He felt the purple eyes examining him, puzzlement and compassion oddly mingled in their look. "You are awfully bitter," he heard her say. "You were hurt before you broke your head. Were you—in the war?"

Aspinall nodded, regretting this turn in the conversation, but seeing no way to steer it to safer ground.

"Which side?"

"The south," he said harshly. And he waited sullenly to hear her ask how it was that an ex-Rebel was holding a position of trust with Holladay, so soon after hostilities had ceased. But the girl continued to regard him with eyes that were too tender, too understanding for his comfort. And when she spoke her tone was one of apology.

"All right. It isn't any of my business. I wasn't prying, Mr. Aspinall. I was only interested. I—I can understand your being bitter. But, after all, the war is over now—"

The southerner's teeth clicked together, like jaws of a closing trap. "The war is *not* over!" he said angrily, as much for his own hearing as for hers. "You who think it is will—"

He remembered himself in time to check it there. He was trembling with fatigue or fury, and appalled at what he'd almost said. He wished again that the girl would leave him. She disturbed him. She provoked him into saying things which must not be said. And his snappishness had done its work. The girl stood up. Her face had lost its flush, and the purple eyes held anger of their own.

"I'm sorry—*suh!*—that you lost your plantation and all your slaves!" she told him coldly. "I'm sorrier that you take it so hard. But I think you'll find they are lost for all time—and your stupid war with them. I'm sorry my father didn't remove more bone from your head when he had the chance!"

With that, she turned and left him, stamping angrily back in the direction of the cook house. Aspinall stared blindly after her, sick in body and mind, burning with fever and madness.

Wait a day or two, he thought punitively. You'll find the war's not over.

HE DISOWNED the thought quickly, seeing what it was, and where it led him. And he suddenly found his own society unbearable. He rose uncertainly from the bench and left the porch, his supper untasted, in search of more edifying company.

Ridden by disaffection, driven by thoughts too oppressive for thinking, he wandered over the station in the early

dark. Drifting from stable to warehouse to blacksmith shop. Stopping wherever there were lights and men. Trying to share and dispel his loneliness. Listening to the talk and speaking his own questionable opinions. Trying to escape himself for a while.

But his efforts were unavailing. The thoughts in his head would be thought, regardless. He saw the men not as companions and fellow creatures, but as enemies or friends, as allies or foes in the thing to come. He couldn't hate his enemies yet. But he could size them up, measure them for his hate. Classify this one as dangerous, a man who would fight desperately, that one a whittler who wouldn't know what it was about until he was a corpse.

The buildings, too, he judged with professional discernment. Judged them not as stables and warehouses and shops, but as fortified places which might or might not be held. And his survey led him to one sure conclusion: Virginia Dale, in ordinary circumstances, would be a tough nut to crack. Given adequate warning and time for preparation, the station would stand indefinitely. But, struck by surprise attack and sabotaged by enemies within, the station would be taken.

Aspinall could picture in his mind the fighting and confusion, the violence of the killing. But, somehow, the picture was not convincing. There was a flaw in it somewhere, a crack in the viewing glass that destroyed perspective. The image was blurred and out of proportion. Nor could Aspinall define the flaw, though perhaps he did not look too closely. . . .

FROM the stables and warehouses, he wandered to the unused barn where the token garrison was billeted: Fifteen enlisted men and a preening lieutenant with a face like a girl.

These, the southerner knew, would be the first to die. But, tonight, they were alive and homesick and bawdy. Tonight, they griped and grumbled at the army and officers and the food. Aspinall, listening, heard the familiar words and phrases. Words that were the same in any army, in any war: Rich man's war, poor man's fight—Gentlemen by act of Congress, jackass by act of God—The supper tonight would poison a dog. No wonder they call it mess . . .

One had a brother in the occupation of New Orleans, and he told graphically how soft they had it down in that old sailors' town. Another, a veteran of Vicksburg, had a lady's garter, with the Secesh flag inset in a large glass roset, and bragged of how he'd come by it. But, mostly, the talk was of mustering out. Of home. Of farms and jobs and girls. Not girls with flags on their garters. Home girls. Girls that were waiting.

Jim Aspinall could not share in this talk. He couldn't even bear to listen to it for very long. He could sneer at it but his sneers didn't reach any deeper than his face. So he left the barracks and walked alone in the deserted yard, unable to escape himself.

The night was cold and quiet, filled with an odd foreboding. It was as if the very world were holding its breath in expectation of disaster. Somewhere a wolf sent up its yammering wail and was answered thinly from the distance.

It might have been his own frame of mind. But the wolf cries sounded false. He saw, or fancied he saw, furtive movement in the moonshadows along the hedgeline of the creek—the course a man would follow if he wished to slip past the too-few sentries to keep a rendezvous with skylarkers beyond the confines of the station.

Off in the direction of the station attendants' quarters, he could hear the voices of young children. Somewhere much nearer, a banjo was throbbing and a voice was singing softly.

"I wish I was in the land of cotton,
Old times there are not forgotten
Look away—"

Look away!

The trouble was, he couldn't look away. Not any longer. He couldn't get away from himself.

Turning, he walked in the direction of the song. It was coming from a dugout in the side of a hill beyond the stables. A lantern was hanging from the low ceiling, lighting up the open entranceway. Six men were visible, down below the light, shooting dice on a tanned buffalo hide.

There was a stone jug on the earth floor beside the gamesters, and the sour fumes of the mash gave tone to the otherwise oppressive atmosphere of the cellar-like interior. The gamesters looked up idly as the southerner came in, then gave their attention back to the game. Off in a shadowed corner the troubadour lamented softly.

"Then I wish I was in Dixie
Away! Away!
In Dixie Land I'll take my stand,
To live and die, in Dixie—"

Aspinall thought for an instant that Black Eyes was not among his guerillas. Then he saw the irregular officer, seated on a pack pannier at the rear of the cave, well out of the lantern light. The position gave him command of the door and its approach while he himself remained invisible.

APPROACHING nearer, Aspinall observed an overturned packing box beside the seated guerilla. A pistol lay on the box, beside a map and another stone jug. Wilkes did not rise, but waved a hand in greeting, and spoke, his tongue thickened with drink.

"Come in! Glad to see y'u. Just havin' myself a spree. Join me?"

Aspinall looked down and shook his head. He had had no definite purpose in coming here—he had thought. But now that he was here, his purpose seemed quite clear.

"There is a thing I want to talk over," he began, the plan taking shape in his mind. "I have been thinking—"

"Oho!" the guerilla cut in, "y'u been thinkin'! I was feared y'ud stawt to thinkin'."

His teeth flashed white in the shadows and his scorn slapped like a hand. Aspinall's jaw came out. But he refused to anger. He hadn't come here to quarrel.

"There is a coach here, with horses, and a man to drive," he said evenly. "That coach will haul what women and children are in the station, south to Denver. Contact your chiefs and get a guarantee of safe passage. I'll think of a way to persuade Spotswood to evacuate them without getting him suspicious."

The guerilla grunted negatively. "They ain't time fo' anything like that. This pawty of ou's comes off at dawn!"

Aspinall took a short step backward, as if he had been pushed. It really made little difference when it came. But, somehow, dawn seemed very soon. Dawn would come in four or five hours.

So that's why you're getting yourself likkered, he said silently. You're getting yourself in condition. Likely, your red allies are doing the same. And, still loyal to a commitment, the southerner nonetheless felt an unpleasant constriction in his throat.

"Then contact them tonight," he said, his voice still level. "Tell them the women and kids will be in the hotel, and get their guarantee that they won't be harmed. Let me be there to hear them promise it."

The guerilla turned on the pack pannier and swore under his breath. "They wouldn't promise no such thing," he rumbled, "an if they did, theah promise wouldn't be wo'th a damn. *And*"—the voice assumed an ugly edge—"I don't like the way you are stawtin' to give o'dahs around heah!"

Aspinall did not miss the threat implied in the guerilla's declaration. But anger and revulsion were taking the upper hand of loyalty and discretion. His eyes did not yield to the leering black eyes.

"You heard my recommendations," he said stiffly. "They are the only conditions under which I'll have any hand in this!"

The guerilla leaned toward him and looked him up and down with drunken scorn. "Yo' pawticipation was yo' own idee!" he reminded. "An' now that y'u mention it, I don't go much fo' the idee myself. Yo' a bit too white-livahed fo' me . . . Boys," he called, raising his voice, "take chawge of this coffee-wawmah! He's decided not to jine!"

"Hold on a minute!" Aspinall exclaimed, as the men beneath the lantern came to attitudes of attention. He had no clear idea what he was going to say. But he knew he had talked himself into a bad jam, and the guerilla's declaration on the subject of giving orders had planted a seed of an idea deep in the back of his mind. That seed was sprouting into a full-fledged stratagem, and he wanted to think it through.

"Yes?"

Aspinall hesitated another instant. He saw the thing clearly now. But it seemed improbable that a maneuver so strained and so desperate could succeed. On the other hand, they would kill him now, undoubtedly, or at least hold him prisoner until the attack had succeeded. And he found himself remembering certain spirited words, much used by the flag-wavers and literary generals, and later finding practical application by the fighting generals who kept an underdog army in the business of war some years after the business plainly was bankrupt: *When in doubt—attack.*

"Mr. Wilkes," he said in a voice as strained as his thinking, "please answer a question. What is your rank in the CSA?"

"The CSA?" the other repeated stupidly. Then, more brightly, "Why my rank is captain, suh."

Aspinall nodded. It was a point he had gambled on. Perhaps a more reckless gamble would similarly succeed.

"Captain," he said, holding the pistol in his pocket, "my own rank is major. I am taking rank of you."

The guerilla stared, motionless.

"I am taking rank of you," Aspinall repeated, pulling the pistol from his pocket and leveling it at the guerilla's head. "I'm taking command of this detachment and of tomorrow's operation against this station. You'll take orders from me—or from the man down in hell. It's for you to choose."

CHAPTER FOUR

When in Doubt—

FOR what seemed a long time the guerilla sat in silence, eyes fixed upon Aspinall through the gloom that separated them, seemingly trying to fix a thing in his mind. Once he started to turn in the direction of the box where the pistol lay. But the sound of Aspinall's gun being eared back to full cock seemed to alter his plans. He let the gun alone, and sneered.

"Not that it mattahs," he said thickly, "but y'u lie when y'u make mention of yo' rank. I am familiah with the Yank policy on admittin' Rebels to theah ranks. They take no officahs—an' they took you!"

"I had a brother," Aspinall said quietly. "He was a corporal. I found his body in the course of the retreat I was captured in. I had his papers on me when captured. I merely let the deception stand."

But the other looked unimpressed. "To hell yith yo' papahs—an' yo' ranks! I asked y'u, once, what yo' game is heah. An' naow I ask yu again. I want a straight answah this time!"

"You've had a straight answer," Aspinall said in a thinning tone. "I'm here in support of General Price, and I intend to manage this fracas in a way that he'd approve. If I have to kill you in order to accomplish that, why I'll answer to Price—when the time comes!"

Silence piled higher in the semi-lighted dugout. The splutter of the lantern and the breathing of the men underneath it fell upon Aspinall's ears as deafening sounds. The others seemed to be awaiting specific orders before moving against him, and the southerner was gambling that the cocked and leveled pistol in his hand would forestall such orders. Suddenly the man called Wilkes laughed softly.

"Yo' eithah a lot smawtah else a lot dummah than I took y'u to be, fella!" he exclaimed. "Maybe that lick on the haid addled yo' brains. Or do y'u really believe that truck about Price?"

"Truck?" Aspinall echoed.

"Truck!" the other affirmed. "Price is in Mexico, in hidin'—a price on his haid! His corps is scattahed from hell to breakfast, an' you kin take my wo'd, because I rode with him. You ain't a majah in the CSA, because they ain't any CSA. Hell, man, the wa' is ovah. An' yo' makin' a dandy fool out o' yo'self!"

Aspinall was stunned. Had the guerilla known it, he could have reached up in that moment and taken the gun from the Southerner's hand, and the latter would never have known that he'd so much as moved. He was blind and deaf and numb. His head was starting to whirl, and he leaned upon the earth wall behind him to keep his feet.

"Now who's lying?" he blurted.

But it wasn't any good. He knew, even as the question crossed his lips, that Black Eyes wasn't lying. He knew that Price *was* in Mexico, that the war *was* over. The

story of the general's activity in the southwest was vicious rumor, one with the rumors of England's intervention and the Confederate coup in Washington. He'd thought that a man of Holladay's stature would be immune to rumors, and he'd swallowed the lie whole because he'd hungered for such lies. He was the colossal fool that Black Eyes said he was—victim again of wishful thinking and self-deception. And life had no mercy on fools. Life had lowered the boom again. Tricked first into treason to the Confederacy, and now into equal treason to the other cause he had espoused.

Twice a fool and twice a traitor! Double-damned, for all the world to see! A cosmic dupe, who never learned . . .

"If Price is in Mexico," he mumbled, "then what are you doing up here on the Overland. Whom do you represent?"

"I rep'sent myself — an' them boys yondah!" the raider said candidly. "I will still rep'esent you, if y'u'll get the flags out of yo' eyes an' act growed up!"

BUT Aspinall wasn't listening. He had known the answer to this question, also, before asking. Black eyes was no guerilla. He was a land-pirate, pure and simple. Raiding and murdering in the Quantrell style, but in league with the warring, deluded Indians. The "white renegade" was more than a bogey, after all. It was a reality, as horrible and intolerable as any painted in the legends. And Jim Aspinall had been tricked into turning white renegade himself.

"Oh, come now, majah!" the pirate said, his manner wheedling and indulgent now. "If it's a biggah cut you want, they will be plenty to go around. Besides the goods that will bring hides an' robes in the Injun trade, theah is a fawtune in gold in Spotswood's express vault that the reds don't know nothing abaout!"

Aspinall heard him only faintly. And if he considered the proposition, it was because it seemed to fill a void which otherwise yawned blank before him. At a single blast the world of self delusion in which the southerner had lived for a week had been shattered to chaos, and the thing the pirate offered seemed to give point to continued living. It seemed to furnish a chance to strike back at life in retaliation for the latest and crowning hoax of which life had made him the butt.

"Put daown yo' gun an' be a good boy," the pirate coaxed, "an' I might even yield a point on that gel that has you pantin' so!"

Aspinall could not explain it, then or later. But the pirate's reference to the girl decided the issue in his mind. He didn't even know whether the decision arose out of exhilaration or despair. Extremes of stimuli blunt the senses. Sunstroke induces chills and frost can burn like fire. And the vast reversal of horizons

left him with but one clear thought. He had made one cosmic blunder here tonight. But two mistakes did not make a right act. Copy books to the contrary, two negatives did not constitute a positive.

"The odds heah are slightly in my favah!" the pirate was saying, as if he read the other's thoughts. "So don't get any idees abaout changin' sides again or I will have my boys take care you!"

It had already occurred to Aspinall that he should be crafty—pretend to yield, until he could escape the dugout. But he reckoned they would kill him now anyhow, at first opportunity. Besides, he had had his fill of treachery, of double-dealing and outsmarting himself. Here was one issue he would meet squarely, even though it meant he would never meet another.

"Black Eyes," he said in a kind of crazy triumph, "there are worse things than dying, and most of them have happened to me. I still outrank you, as a rebel and as a man. I hand out the alternatives. Raise your hands and surrender, and tell your men to do the same—or I'll shoot you so dead you will stink before you hit the ground!"

ALL breathing in the room seemed to have stopped. The guerillas under the lantern and in the shadows along the walls were watching Aspinall narrowly, hands to weapons, but holding those hands in the knowledge that their leader would be the first in the dugout to die. The same sure knowledge was on Black Eyes, staying the words that were on his lips. The glistening eyes were watching Aspinall as a snake watches its adversary. Awaiting an opening through which to strike.

Aspinall meant that there should be no such opening. But he was finished with deceiving himself. He knew it could only end one way. The other raiders would sacrifice their leader before they would accept surrender. As quick as they saw what their own choice was, they would shoot Aspinall, to save themselves. But Aspinall's sole ambition at that moment was to kill this black-eyed creature. Without him, the attack might not succeed. And as for his own death, Aspinall could regard that eventuality quite calmly. Neither he nor life would be out very much. And perhaps his dying would atone for his mistakes. . . .

There was a furtive movement, back along one wall, as one of the raiders apparently sought to maneuver for a shot that would end the waiting game. Aspinall swung his pistol to snap a quick shot in that direction, and Black Eyes sprang up at him, like a jack-in-the-box. Aspinall swung the pistol back and fired point blank. The pirate captain lurched and fell face down at his feet, bloody pulp creaming out from his shattered head.

Aspinall's third shot, drowned in the roar of rage from the other raiders, smashed the lantern. In the bright flash of light as the wick snuffed out, he saw a dozen guns pointed at him, and he half-jumped, half-fell into the sudden dark, landing on his face on the earth floor. At the same instant, the guns crashed. Flame lanced the dark from the dozen different points, and in the vaulted enclosure the noise was a continuous shuddering, racketing blast.

Aspinall, out of the line of fire, got to his feet, his mouth full of dirt, and made his way along one wall, toward the moonlighted arch of the entrance. The confusion was now hopeless, with shooting, and shouts to cease the shooting.

Twice on the seemingly long journey he collided with others in the dark. But these, colliding with others, made no outcry. Not until he reached the entrance was he challenged. Then he clubbed his accoster with his pistol, and burst outside—but not unseen.

"Theah he goes!" a hateful molasses voice sang out. "Drawp the tricky cuss!"

ASPINALL ducked around the stable as a ragged firing started behind him, and ran into a dozen bluecoats coming at the double.

"Ha-alt!" the high-voiced lieutenant barked in a strained falsetto. "Who goes?"

"Friend!" Aspinall panted. "But there are foes behind. The place is under attack, Lieutenant—from Wilkes' dugout. They're not buffalo hunters. They are raiders in league with the reds. You had better subdue them!"

The lieutenant stared at him, uncomprehending or unconvinced. But another

volley of gunfire from the direction of the dugout argued better. One soldier coughed and slumped to the ground, and another swore in a thin and minor voice, shaking a bloody hand.

"Corral 'em!" the lieutenant shouted. "Return the fire!"

For a minute or two, the fighting was like other night fighting that Aspinall had known. Then the raiders took shelter in the dugout.

"Use bombs, Lieutenant, if you have them," Aspinall advised. "They'll be hard to get at, in that cave. And there are reds somewhere out there. This might bring on an attack!"

"Reds?" Bob Spotswood repeated, coming up out of breath with a rifle in his hands. "What are you talking about? What's going on?"

Aspinall told him in as few words as he could. Told all that impressed him as pertinent, at any rate. That he was Holladay's secret agent, sent to locate the raiders, and had succeeded.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" the agent demanded. "Why didn't you tell me the truth about your wound?"

"Because you brought Wilkes into the room with you and he had a gun under his coat," Aspinall replied readily. "And I couldn't have told you anyhow. I only had the devils spotted then. I didn't know their plans."

Spotswood turned to the hesitating lieutenant and to the crowd of civilians that had assembled. "Bombs sound like the right remedy to me. Save one of them for questioning. I don't care what happens to the rest!"

But several were taken, and all were persuaded to talk. And the station was altered at once for the expected assault.

The attack did not develop until dawn, however. And then it was half-hearted. The reds had been forewarned of disaster by the violence heard in the station during the night, and when no support materialized from inside, they drew off sullenly to wait.

For a day and a night, thereafter, there were desultory attacks and much shouting of insults. But on the second day the war party disappeared completely. And soon the whites understood why.

Connor's strategy in invading the tribes' homeland had been justified. He had found the raiders' home camps undefended and had destroyed them together with large quantities of war supplies and horses. The raiders were riding north to protect their women and children, and their power to wage war had been broken. Peace was promised, therefore, along the Overland. Additional livestock and supplies were coming from Omaha and Salt Lake. Stations were to be rebuilt as soon as possible. Travel was to be resumed at once along the continental route.

AND on the day before the first westbound coach was to leave Virginia Dale, a stage on which the Rutledges both had seats, Jim Aspinall burst through the shell of taciturnity which had denied him all human association for more than a year, and told the purple-eyed girl his story. Told her much more than he'd told Spotswood. Told her why he had put on the blue uniform in the beginning, and what had been in his mind when he came north to Virginia Dale in the service of

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Ben Holladay. How he'd made contact with the raiders, intending to compound treason with treachery—only to have his treachery boomerang.

He told it all, sparing himself nothing. Told it savagely and defiantly. Justifying no part of it.

"So y'u see me!" he concluded mercilessly. "Traitor to the Confederacy. Traitor to the Union and Holladay. Traitor even to the renegades I joined!"

"But never traitor to yourself!" the girl pointed out with devastating common sense. "Why must you be so bitter? Your treason, as you call it, saved this station and everyone in it. That is called patriotism, where I come from. And that's how it seems to be regarded here. Bob Spotswood swears he'll get you discharged or detached from active service, to help reorganize the line."

Aspinall was silent. The fact that he was looked on as a hero at Virginia Dale seemed only an added ignominy, another of life's jokes on Jim Aspinall. The girl's words reminded him of Holladay's promise of a reward, if he should succeed in his mission. But he derived no comfort from this, either. The trouble was, his mission had failed. That's what the others wouldn't see. That's what this girl herself couldn't see, knowing his whole story.

"As for the war," the girl went on, "it wasn't your private feud. You didn't lose it all by yourself. There are lots of others who lost, too, and have to learn to live with the idea."

"A lot of men lost," Aspinall conceded, unable to escape or even to migitate the thing he now must wear as a stigma the rest of his days. "But few of them turned their coats, thinking they could change a thing that was already certain—thinking they could escape reality—only to be trapped by the end of the war, with no one understanding."

"The ones who count will understand—if you tell them," the girl insisted. "The ones who won't understand don't count. I hate to sound like a schoolteacher. But you've got to stop feeling sorry for yourself and running yourself down. You won your war, that night in the dugout. And life isn't your enemy. Life is your friend. Life saved you from making a real mistake that night. The other mistakes—now—they just don't count."

"Well," he said dubiously, "I thank y'u for saying such things. It will be easier now for me to tell myself the same. Maybe I can even convince my family and friends when I go back east."

"Why go back?" the girl pressed. "Your work will be on the Holladay Line. If you don't stay with it, why not come to California? There are wonderful opportunities there for young men. Promise me you'll come!" Her eyes were wide and she was breathing hard.

Aspinall hesitated, confused by the eagerness in her voice and manner. Wondering about one specific opportunity for one specific young man. But he didn't dare ponder it very hard. Not after all this girl knew of him.

They were walking through the knee-deep grass beside the stream, and the hedge of brush was between them and the station. The girl halted suddenly, facing him.

"You haven't answered me," she said. "Will you come to California—when you can?"

"Of course I'll come, if you want me to," he said matter-of-factly.

"Well, I do want you to come, and I will—"

Her voice trailed off in seeming confusion, and Aspinall was bothered and a little puzzled to see that she was blushing. But not much puzzled. He had begun to understand. Only he wouldn't let himself understand. Life had played him too many tricks already. He wouldn't lay himself open again.

But then the girl raised her head, and her eyes and her mouth held a challenge that was as old as the first woman. Aspinall hesitated another instant, debating. Then an old motto came back to mind. One that had served him well already at Virginia Dale:

When in doubt—

He caught her loveliness in his arms, and her kiss was rich, yielding and demanding. And Aspinall knew then that she had been right.

He had won his war, and life was his friend, after all.

THE END

ESCAPE IN THE DESERT

Those fleeing pioneer pardners thought the stolen carbine gave them one last chance to escape Indian slow torture—for they didn't know it was unloaded!

ONLY yesterday the two men, aloof and unspeaking, had ridden out together in advance of the emigrant train that toiled down the desolate and forbidding valley of the Humboldt. Yesterday they had been as free as the country through which they rode. They had been clothed, adequately at least; the one in homespun, the other in ornamented though trail-worn buckskin. Nor had they been too concerned, except for the pressing need of finding water untainted by alkali where, apparently, there was none. Even their instinctive dislike, nurtured now by the long weary days of travel behind them into an accepted and smoulder-

The man came in at the full run, sure of his quarry, knife gleaming in the sunlight

By STEVE HAIL

ing animosity, had been put aside under the duress of the common need.

But now they lay naked and bound on the filth-strewn earth of the Digger encampment. The wounded one, Thaddeus Clegg, professional trail guide hired on at Fort Hall by the company, was blessedly unconscious, with his closed eyes upturned to the indifferent stars embedded like bits of mica in the black robe of night flung across the limitless Nevada sky.

The other, Mordecai Ross, silent too, though unsleeping, put away the bitterness that welled in him like the polluted waters of the Humboldt—the damned Humboldt—itself, and breathed a prayer of thankfulness to whoever or whatever lay beyond those stars. It was thankfulness, he supposed, for the horses as much as anything, though not for Clegg's pinto that he could hear now moving restlessly in the stand of willows on the farther outskirts of the camp.

The thankfulness, if you could call it that, was for his own big gray that had been gutted and hacked into chunks for the earthen stew pots that simmered over the still warm embers of the close-by cook fires. For it was the feast after famine, he knew, the gorging on the rich horseflesh after the eternal diet of roots and crickets and lizards, that had saved Clegg and himself from slow torture and even slower death, though that, God knew, would come soon enough.

Beside him, Clegg stirred feebly and a fitful babble of delirium passed his pain-distorted lips. Ross bent his knees, kicked the wounded man with his bound feet, put his mouth close to the other's ear. He whispered savagely, "For God's sake, Clegg! You're asking for it!"

Clegg, unheeding or unhearing, babbled on.

The lone buck left to guard them arose, grunting, from the shadowed wall of a reed hut and strode toward them. He, too, was naked, except for Clegg's fringed shirt, a trophy of yesterday's ambush when the sudden volley of arrows had cut Clegg down and sent Ross' gray rearing, screaming, crashing to the earth with a shaft in its heaving lungs.

Wan moonlight struck highlights from Ross' own Spencer carbine, gripped now in the Digger's corded fist. Starshine glistened on greasy hair falling shoulder length, bracketing the cruel, jet eyes. The body stench of the man as he drew near was like a clenched fist laid across Ross' mouth.

The buck bent over and twisted and worked the haft of the broken arrow that was embedded in Clegg's shoulder. He belched once, open-mouthed, enjoyably, then the barb broke free of the gaping wound and he flung it from him with a quick gesture of annoyance. The prone man awoke to consciousness long enough to scream out his agony to the waning night. The sound was an echo of the Digger's full, scornful laughter.

ROSS said, "You red hound!" but he said it to himself. He lay there unmoving, watching through half-closed eyes as the Indian returned to his watching place. Ross turned his head to his companion, silent once again except for the breath drawing in in deep snoring gasps through the open mouth. The moonlight showed him a small man, yet with an overlong spade-jawed face, weathered above its full beard by a hundred summer suns. The beaded sweat of fever stood out above the arrogant mouth and over the frosty, cocksure—too cocksure—eyes. Ross wondered if they were cocksure now. He thought not. Not after yesterday.

He turned his own lean face to the sky. The cool stars seemed no dimmer, yet the faint lessening of the darkness that would be false dawn could not be far away. The dawn—and then, he knew, the torpor spawned of glutted bellies would pass. The dawn, and then . . . .

The earth, still holding the heat of the desert day, was warm against his spine, yet he felt cold needles weaving a tapestry of terror across the small of his back.

The moment passed and he set his teeth against the pain and began working again on the raw horsehide that bound his swollen, bleeding wrists. He— For the first time he felt the thongs give a little. He waited for the clamor of his heart to lessen, sure that the Digger must hear the sudden hope hammering in his gaunt body.

The buck belched again, got up, turned toward them. Ross' breath, the slow passing of the night itself, stopped. Then the Indian turned aside, walked a step or two

and relieved himself against the bole of a willow sapling. Ross breathed again, a long silent sigh of relief and at the same time felt the bonds slip free. The Digger returned, squatted against the wall, the carbine gripped in both hands, elbows hooked across his knees. After endless time he nodded, recovered, and then his head fell slowly forward, the hair falling like slimy river moss around his shoulders.

Ross looked again at the sky. The stars seemed fainter now, though he couldn't be sure. Anyway, it had to be now, if ever. He bent his knees, drawing his feet up behind him, his numbed fingers fumbling at the knots that held his ankles. They gave, at last, and he worked his feet, swiveling them at the ankle joints, feeling the blood burning in his toes as circulation returned. Then, still lying flat, he turned once more to Clegg, and hesitated. The wounded man would be an encumbrance, a dead weight slowing his feet. And after all, he, Mordecai Ross, owed the other nothing.

He lay there, thinking again of the company's indecision, their exhausted bewilderment at Fort Hall only a few short weeks before. He remembered Clegg's appearance at the camp, his offer of professional guidance—for a price; a stiff price—over a purportedly shorter and easier route to the south and west of the Great Salt Lake. As one of the accepted leaders of the company Ross recalled his own objections, based on the rumored terrors and hardships of the cut-off.

His objections had been overridden. It was due in part, Ross knew, to the weakened condition of the oxen, the fear of being caught in the mountain passes to the north by the swift advent of winter. But in the final reckoning it had been Clegg's glib tongue, the arrogant confidence in his pale eyes that had swayed the balance. Ross heard himself repeating a hackneyed aphorism in defense of his own conservative opinion. "The long way round is sometimes the shortest way home."

And Clegg's answer, with naked contempt curling his bearded lip: "Who's goin' home? It's California you're headin' for, ain't it? A man wants somethin' bad enough, he's got to accept a gamble now and then."

"Gambling is all right," Ross had said slowly, "when the stakes aren't so high a man can afford it." He had waved a hand at his own wagon standing beside the trail, its wheels no longer bright and yellow, its weathered tilt patched and sewn. In its shelter, he knew, bed-ridden with spotted fever, his wife of a few months lay silent and uncomplaining. The dark fragile beauty that had been hers had faded, too, before the relentless suns, the rigors of forced drives, the uncountable hardships of the route to the west. Yet it was a temporary thing, a thing that would pass as the journey neared its end—if it ever neared an end.

ALL that, Ross knew and his eyes had found Clegg's and held them. "A man's family tends to run the odds way out of sight. You admit the cut-off is a gamble then? Indians?"

Then the scornful smile hanging crooked on the bearded mouth. "The Diggers been cowed a year past. There'll be no trouble there. Maybe you just don't have the stomach for even an odds-on bet, friend."

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There had been the company's rude laughter then, and old grizzled John Peterson's statement. "It appears to be the will of the company, Ross. Time is the thing we got to beat now. We'll be accepting this gentleman's offer. You can go or stay, as you will."

Ross had felt the warm blood of unreasoning anger drumming in his ears, but Peterson had been right, in a way. The majority opinion was against him, and that was that. Even Theresa's mother was with the others. It was plain on her face as she came toward him from a neighbor's wagon. She was a forceful woman, even in little things, and Ross sighed, buttoning his shirt hastily across his chest, recalling her outspoken disapproval of masculine immodesty.

But he had been in no mood for even good-natured argument, so he had curled his bullwhip over the rump of his leader, turned the wagon into line with the rest.

They had turned south, crossing the edge of the great salt desert, following the valley of the Humboldt as the drying, salted tongue of water dwindled and disappeared in the marshy wastes of the Carson Sink. The passage had been a bitter one, for Thaddeus Clegg had been wrong. The Diggers were on the march, and the trail was marked by burned wagons and skeletons of men and women and children, their hair—what was left of it—hanging to the brush, the flesh gnawed from the bones by roaming wolves.

Now, Ross looked at the man who had led them into this; the man who by his own supreme self-confidence had let himself and Ross be trapped in yesterday's ambush. Looking at him lying there, Ross supposed he should feel pity, yet he felt none. If anyone of the company deserved to die, certainly this . . . And yet Clegg, anyone, deserved a better end than this. Ross sighed, began working on the bonds that held the other's arms and legs.

Clegg stirred, moaned, and Ross said quickly, quietly, "We're making a break for it. Get ahold of yourself."

The guide started to speak and Ross laid a calloused palm across his mouth. "Save your breath. You'll need it. Be ready, that's all. I'm going after the carbine. We got to have it."

He rolled over, began crawling forward. The stone-pocked earth scratched his naked belly, pulled at the short hairs below his navel. He felt nothing. He was conscious only of the dozing figure before him, watching the buck for the slightest hint of movement. There was none, except the regular breathing, the beardless chin rising and falling on the leather shirtfront. Ross got to his knees, moved forward in a half crouch, already feeling the neck cords within his fingers.

Then the Digger's knee slipped out of the crook of his elbow and the gun clattered to the ground, sounding in the stillness of the sleeping camp like the devil slamming the main gates of hell. Ross was on him like a mountain cat, eager hands clutching at the throat, thumbs gouging into the windpipe like a hawk's avenging talons. There was other movement then, on the far side of the camp and Clegg's horse stomped and whinnied shrilly, tore loose its hobbles, went pounding off into the darkness.

ROSS let go. It took time to strangle a man. Seconds, anyway, and seconds could be too long. He flung the man from him, driving a foot at the front of the fringed shirttail, low, but high enough, then snatched up the fallen carbine and turned away. The Digger was on his feet like a wounded wolverine, staggering, yet leaping forward in swift pursuit. There was no time to fumble for the trigger, Ross knew, no time to swing the muzzle. Then, knowing the chance of trying to bludgeon that shadowy head, he swung the gun by the barrel in a vicious arc, low down, laying it across the Indian's legs with all the power of his heavy shoulders. He felt the stock hit home, heard bone snap like a branch under a wheel tread and then he was running, head down, bent in a low crouch, following Clegg's stumbling shadow as it lined out for the pale wash of dawn lightening the east.

They came out of the stand of scrub willow, running headlong, angling across the sun-baked earth, taking the shortest path toward the thin brush that bordered the dry wash of the river. Behind them, as they broke into the open, horn bows twanged, sounding like plucked cello strings in an empty hall. The rush of arrows was the hoarse whisper of the flesh-

less Reaper himself, beckoning them with a bony finger. They ran on, somehow untouched, hearing the shouts behind them and, too soon, the shots. A hollow booming blast at first, probably an old Spanish smooth bore, but as they plunged into the dubious shelter of the brush, two more shots laced the branches beside them. They were sharper this time, more defined. Clegg's gun, the Henry, Ross thought. He realized too that their naked white bodies must stand out like headstones on a moonlit night.

Clegg was staggering now, his small compact body hunched almost double, his rutted face rime-white beneath its leathered mask. Ross reached out, laid a hand on the other's shoulder, pulled him down into the breast-high brush. "Far enough for now. They may not even know we have the gun. The light's still poor, and I don't think that buck on guard has done much talking." The corners of his broad mouth lifted in a faint half smile. "We'll let 'em know."

He turned to face the dozen bucks that were loping across the flat not too hurriedly, like a wolf pack sure of wounded quarry. He knelt, parted the brush, laid his cheek to the smooth walnut stock, waiting for his laboring lungs to quiet. The blue eyes lining up the sights were brighter now in the growing daylight, reflecting the hope that was in him for the first time in endless hours.

"In the belly," Clegg whispered hoarsely. "They don't die as quick, but they never get up."

Ross snugged the stock tighter to his bare shoulder, felt rills of sweat running down the seams of his cheek where it creased below his one closed eye. He drew in a long slow breath, held it, tightened his curved forefinger on the trigger and waited for the rocking blast of gunpowder to tear the dawn apart. There was only a dull metallic click as the firing pin fell on an empty chamber.

Clegg sobbed openly, unashamed.

ROSS checked the magazine, found it empty. He cursed softly, fervently, wondering what quirk of mind had caused the Digger to unload the gun. Some deep, instinctive sense of caution, perhaps, or . . . Well, it didn't matter now. There was no time to probe the workings of primitive minds. He rose to his full height, lining up the useless weapon on the approaching figures, swinging it slowly to let the light strike reflection from the metal. The Indians slowed, then sprang aside, no longer unhurried, legging at full stride for the cover at the river's edge.

The faint smile ghosted again across Ross' mouth and then was gone. The Diggers knew now he had a gun. He wondered if they realized it was as useless as a peeled stick. He thought not, judging by their frantic leap for cover. He turned to Clegg. "This'll give us a start. They'll want to talk things over. Can you make it?"

Clegg's hand came away from the clotting wound in his shoulder. He passed shaking fingers right and left across the paleness that ringed his mouth. "No," he said, "I can't. But I will. Ross, which way you headin'?"

Ross looked at him sharply. "Back the way we came. Where else? If the company broke camp at dawn, they'll be rolling this way by now. It'll be fifteen miles at most. We'll run onto them well before sundown. Earlier, if they've got scouts out—pray God they have."

"Fifteen miles." Clegg said it as if it were a thousand. He looked at his naked feet. "We'll never make it. Now, look. There's a trading post west and a little north of here. Close. At the first rise of the foothills. I haven't been by there in a year, but it's less'n ten miles, as I remember. Old man Greenley runs it. Injun trade. Paiutes and such, not these dog eaters. No water, as I recall, but a stout shack and a good stock of stores. We can do without water, but not without bullets. We make Greenley's we're safe. Ross, what do you say?"

There was no pleading in the voice, Ross gave him that. But it was in the fevered eyes, no longer cold, no longer confident. So that was it. Ross saw it now. Clegg recognized his failing strength, knew he'd never last the long, winding sun-baked miles back to the wagon train's protection. And yet Ross knew that was their only chance. The backtrail afforded cover of sorts. There was the thin scrub, the occasional stand of scrawny cottonwood and willow, whereas the course that Clegg sug-

gested lay across open ground, broken only at long intervals by sparse clumps of sage and greasewood.

And suppose by some miracle they did reach Greenley's? Ross thought he knew what they would find there. An abandoned shack, probably, cleaned of everything by a forewarned and fleeing trader. And after that, what? Ross saw that too. A repetition of yesterday, only this time there would be no reprieve, no second chance. The Diggers, thwarted once, would see to that. No, their best bet was the backtrail east—for himself, at least.

Clegg? Well, he would have to take his chances. There was little else, really, that Ross could do. He could prolong the agony, he supposed, put off the ending for a few short hours, but that was all. No, to run for Greenley's didn't make sense. To head for the wagon train, did. It was as simple as that. From here on it would have to be each man for himself, and let the laggards die. It was cruel, sure, but that's the way it was. No use of two men dying when one had a chance at life. That was logical, that made sense—and Mordecai Ross was no gambler. He was a sensible man.

HE RAISED his head carefully. There was movement in the brush beside the river bank and a shot ripped past, high and to his right, wide by several feet. Wide but close enough. It was time to get long gone. He said gruffly, "C'mon," and touched the guide, turning him eastward along the bank. They went at a fast trot for awhile, with Ross leading the way. When he looked back occasionally he held his gaze to the rim of brush, avoiding Clegg's eyes, not wanting to see what lay behind them. But he couldn't avoid hearing the hoarse, labored breathing of the smaller man, and that was bad enough.

He trotted on, his teeth set, muscles ridged hard in his jaw. It was tough, all right, but there was nothing else he could do, and that was that. Telling himself that, savoring the logic of it, his jaw relaxed and he felt better. Even Clegg's sobbing breathing did nothing to him now.

There was nothing he could do, but he did it anyhow, for he remembered the night just past. He couldn't put that from him. It was something that would be with him always. He saw himself lying helpless on the ground, with all hope gone, yet praying for deliverance somehow and the chance to reach the wagon train and see a girl—no, a woman now—named Theresa, who even now must be . . .

He shook his head and sighed. He said, "Hell," and swung abruptly to the left, breaking clear of the cover, heading west for Greenley's, putting the Diggers between the wagon train and themselves. It was going to be a gamble, a long gamble, but he knew the backtrail east was not even that, for Clegg.

He slowed, waiting for the guide to catch up. When the other drew alongside, Ross slapped him across the bare buttocks with his free hand and said, "Lead the way. I'll hold down this end of it. Less than ten miles, you say?" He brought up a laugh from some hidden depths. "Like shooting pike in a pickle barrel!"

But it wasn't, for the Diggers were after them now, no longer hesitant, fanning out behind them like plains wolves howling for the kill. Thereafter, it was a dream, some nightmare from a horrible fabled hell. It was scorching sunlight laid like a lash across their naked bodies. It was alkali dust, hot and gagging as a dragon's breath, singeing their throats, filling their lungs with powdered flame. It was painted demons, not screaming now, but saving their breath, running grimly, purposefully, sending sporadic shots after the weaving white figures before them.

THREE things were in their favor, Ross realized. First, they had a start of a few hundred yards. Second, the half-starved, runty Diggers could have little more stamina than they themselves. And lastly, their pursuers evidently did not yet know that the carbine, still carried threateningly in Ross' hand, was empty.

The guide went down, sprawling headlong as his stumbling feet failed to lift clear of a patch of sage. Ross' heart choked upward in his throat, slowing his breathing, but he stopped and turned, raising the gun to his shoulder, taking deliberate aim.

It almost worked. The Indians slowed, but then a lone buck was coming on at full stride, cruel lips parted, screaming insanely, having guessed the truth. Either

that, Ross thought, or it was blood lust overcoming caution. Whatever it was, it didn't matter now and he lowered the carbine and waited.

The man came in at the full run, sure of his quarry, knife gleaming in the sunlight, poised for the kill. That, at least, was good, Ross thought. It would be over quickly, win, lose or draw before the rest of the pack closed in. He turned as if to run, then as the Digger leaped after him he spun around, diving under the descending blade, ramming his head hard into the other's belly. The buck grunted and staggered to one side and that was enough. Ross hit him once with the clubbed carbine, felt wood meet bone and then the man was down, groveling on the earth like a bludgeoned rabbit.

Ross stooped for the knife, heard movement behind him and saw that Clegg had regained his feet somehow, was miraculously running on again. Ross followed, watching the other through the whirling white haze that clouded his eyes. He looked at the bent back, the short spindly legs, widespread now and rubbery, wondering how long Clegg could last. His own chest muscles were like rusted iron hoops ready to give way at any moment. His legs were dull and clumsy, his bare feet, already bleeding freely, feeling like they had been seared by hell's own embers.

Clegg raised a leaden arm and pointed, his voice barely audible, yet with an edge of hope around it. "Not far now. You can see the trees."

Not far! Two or three miles, perhaps, yet it could have been a hundred, or a thousand. They ran on, giving everything they had now, trying to increase the distance between themselves and their pursuers, for the Diggers had put caution aside, knowing there was nothing to fear from Ross' impotent gun.

But in the end it was done, or nearly so. They came into the stand of cottonwood, saw Greenley's shack still standing, and beside it the newly dug earth of a well, a wooden bucket poised above it on a clumsy gallows frame. There was irony, Ross thought, if you had the stomach for it. Water, less than a day's drive from the road trace and . . .

"Greenley's gone!" Clegg's whisper was a flat monotone of final despair.

ROSS looked, saw that heavy boards shuttered all the windows. The door itself was barred, with a massive padlock clasped securely to iron staples.

Faint hope was in Clegg's eyes. "Prob'ly means he left his stock locked up this way. He couldn't have taken everything. He'll have left the heavy stuff. There'll be ammunition inside."

"Will there now?" Ross said bitterly. "You're pretty good at guessing wrong," but there was guttural shouting now in the trees beyond the clearing and he brought the butt of the carbine down viciously against the lock. The walnut stock shattered into splinters. The lock held firm.

Clegg tried to say something, but the only sound coming from his throat was a broken sob. Ross thrust him aside, wedged the rifle barrel between hasp and lock, levering outward, putting his back into it. A bullet from an unseen gun smashed into the door panel beside him, lacing his face

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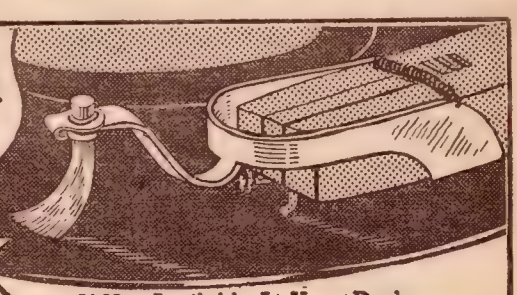
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with splinters. He felt the veins hammering in his temples, his strained back muscles weakening. He saw the steel barrel bending slowly, like a green willow branch, and he knew that it was no good, that nothing or no one could save them now. Then, so suddenly it sent him sprawling, the bolts tore free and Clegg was lifting the bar, putting his shoulder against the panel. It gave at once and then Clegg was clawing at him, half dragging, half pushing him into the room. Behind them more shots slammed into the sprung door, thudding into the walls.

Ross got his feet under him, ducked away from the open doorway, letting the fading sunlight flood in behind them. It wasn't until then that he saw that the place was empty, every shelf swept clean, drawers pulled out and stripped of contents. The only thing in the bare room was a torn and dirty blanket thrown across the wooden slats of a bunk in a far corner.

Clegg groaned, sank slowly, heavily to the earthen floor as if the crushing weight of this final disappointment was too much for his small body to bear. Ross turned toward him, then stopped as a shadow filled the doorway, blotting out the sunlight.

The Digger fired as he ran, followed the bullet in. The blast of exploding powder was metallic thunder in the confines of the room. Ross felt the slug burn across his ribs between arm and flanks, but even as he spun he was swinging what was left of the carbine, one-handed, driving the splintered butt hard to the side of the shadowy head. It landed dead center, sounding like an axe striking rotten wood and the man went plunging into the far wall. Ross swung around, feeling the sweating fear of anticipation strong upon him, waiting for the next red killer to show himself in the frame of the doorway. It remained unshadowed.

He heard the shots then, far off, and muted shouting and saw a dust cloud looking like a capsized funnel rising low and lazy beyond the trees. Then from out the funnel's mouth six horsemen rode at the full gallop, bodies bent close to horses' withers, firing as they rode. Two of the riders reined up before the door, the others riding on, pursuing the fleeing shadows in the cover beyond the clearing.

JOHN PETERSON, his white mane gray with trail dust and sweat, swung down from his lathered horse. Behind him, a stooped, balding man who must be Greenley, walked stiffly forward.

Peterson said, "Ross, what are you doing here? Not that we're not glad to see you."

Ross told him what they were doing here. Told him wearily, thankfully, feeling exhaustion crawling in him like poison virus. "Now," he said, when he had finished, "I could ask you the same." He smiled wryly. "Not that I'm not glad to see you."

Peterson sleeved sweat from above his eyes. "Greenley here reached camp about midnight. He informed us the Diggers were out and raiding. He'd pulled freight, lock, stock and barrel, headed for the trail, hoping to meet some outfit he could join forces with. He did. Us. Meanwhile, you hadn't shown. We gave you up for lost. He told us about the water here, persuaded us to leave the trail and hole up till the stock recovers and this blows over."

He paused, went on, "Well, the wagons are a few miles behind. We heard the shooting and came arunning." His craggy brows drew together. "Lucky you didn't try the backtrail east. You'd have never found us. Lucky you headed for here."

"Yes," Ross said at last, very slowly. "Wasn't it?"

Greenley had entered the room, was examining Clegg where he lay upon the ragged blanket across the room. He looked up now. "I done some doctorin' in my day. Man's got to—out here. Your guide'll live, I'd say. Lost a lot o' blood, but I can't see no put'efaction in the wound."

Clegg rose to one elbow. It was an effort, but he made it. He looked at Ross. "Then it's thanks to you," he said. "If there's anything I can do . . ." His eyes grew thoughtful. "It was a big gamble, Ross. You needn't have taken it. Common sense said you should've headed east. That was your best bet."

"As it turned out," Ross said, "it wasn't."

Clegg nodded. "Yes, but you didn't know that. You thought you were heading for protection and safety, with a good chance of making it. But you turned west,

instead, because of me. It was long odds. Too long, really. If it had been me, I'm not so sure I'd have played it that way."

Ross looked at the bloodless face, the gray lips, thin and straight now behind the matted beard. The pale eyes, he saw, were still bright with fever, though there was no arrogance in them now. Ross doubted that there ever would be again. They held the soberness of a man who had gambled for the highest stakes of all—and won, though not until the last card had been turned. It was an enduring soberness, Ross knew, for he felt it, too, in his own eyes and knew that a little of it would always be there. He answered Clegg then, at last. "I think," he said, "you would have."

He turned away and went over to the doorway, looking out across the clearing to where, beyond the trees, another dust cloud was rising, growing in the quiet air as the wagon train approached. He saw it through a shimmering haze of heat like a distant mirage, and suddenly there were other things beyond it. There were the wooded hills of California, the broad rich valley of the San Joaquin. He saw the journey's end and a woman named Theresa who would be a girl again. And, inevitably, he saw Theresa's mother. It was then he remembered his nakedness.

He turned back into the room and a slow grin broke the crust of sweat and alkali that edged his mouth. "There's something you can do, at that," he told Clegg. "I'd better have a piece of that blanket."

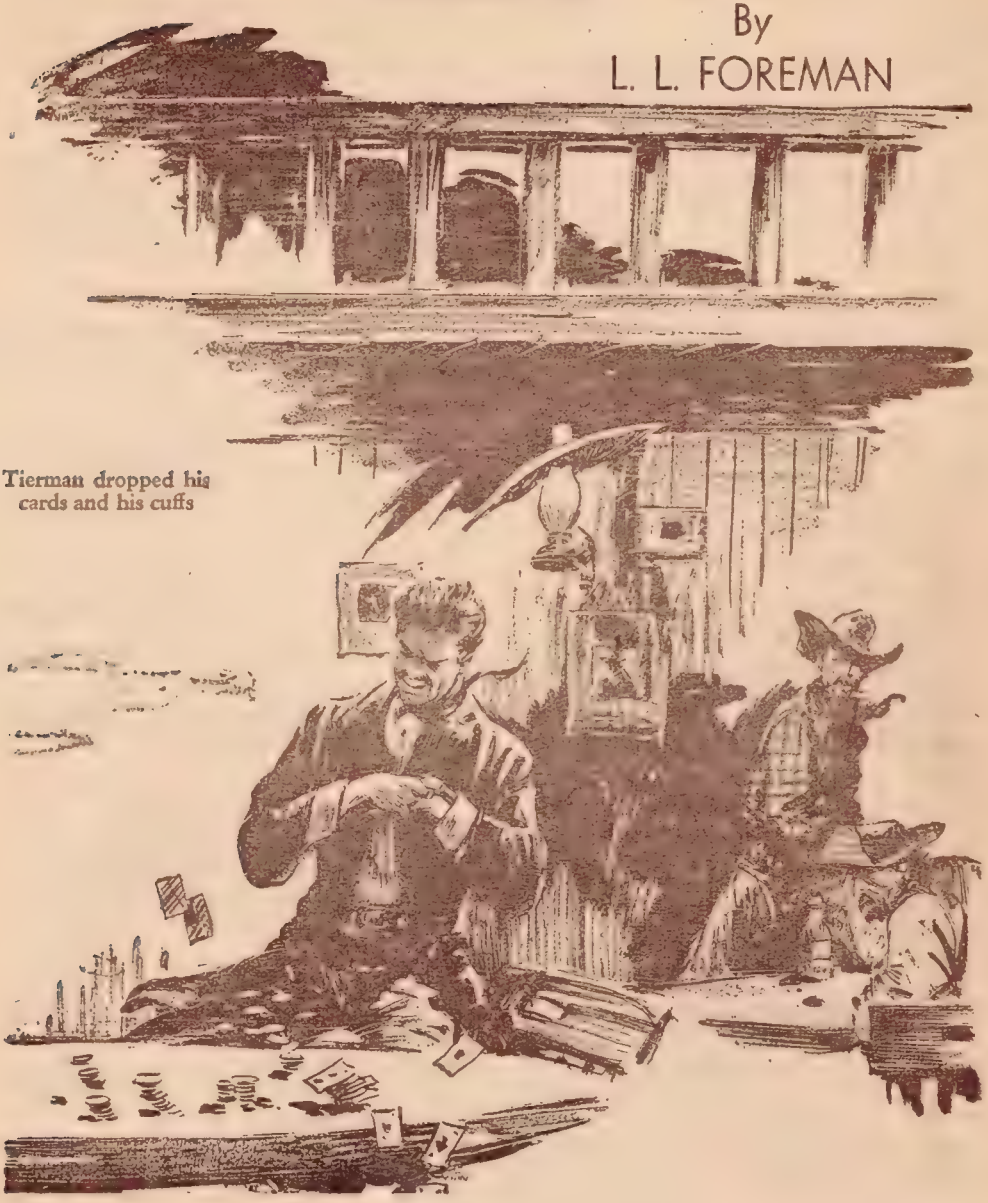
SPANISH PATCH'S LAST FIGHT

The odds were all against Spanish Patch . . . He must kill six times, and could die but once. But what matter the odds, when the men marked for the grave had each sent a slug into the back of Patch's peace-loving dad?

Spanish Patch drew one plain black gun and tripped the firing pin

Dramatic Novelette of the Killer Avenger

By
L. L. FOREMAN



Tierman dropped his cards and his cuffs

CHAPTER ONE

Curse of the Indian Ring

HE RODE up from Mexico into Arizona by way of the old San Pedro smugglers' trail, and after a brief and stormy stopover in the town of Gleason he jogged on to Pierce. Pierce citizens, in Saturday night conclave in the Bonita Bar, looked him over carefully and decided he was a *norte americano* who for some reason of his own had gone Mexican.

He looked Mexican. Somebody murmured he was known as Spanish Patch, added he had gun-whipped a man in Gleason. He wore a plain black Mexican sombrero, his shirt and pants were equally

plain and black in the vaquero style, and he carried two guns slung back on a broad buscadero belt. His forehead and mouth were wide, his cheekbones high. His eyes were agate color, full of *norte americano sabe* and cynicism. He was a quiet-speaking hombre, hard and sharp on the fighting edge, and nobody in the Bonita was fool enough to take him for anything else.

After a drink and a searching look around, Spanish Patch steered over to Tierman's gambling table. Tierman, waiting for prospects, was idly shuffling a deck of cards, his baggy eyes glowering impatiently, his heavy lower lip thrust out. He was known as a shark who rarely lost a dollar and never came out loser in a shooting scrape. He raised his eyes to Spanish Patch and rasped the routine demand, "Name your game an' show your money, mister!"

Spanish Patch didn't name any game. He raised his head high, pulling the chin-string of his black sombrero out of his shirt. What he showed, at the joined ends of the buckskin thongs, was a big silver ring, a Navajo finger-ring with a blue turquoise lighting it and queer Indian symbols stamped on it.

Tierman stared at the ring, shining silver and blue against the black shirt. His eyes widened disbelievingly. He jerked the cuffs of his frock-coat, releasing at once to his grasp the notoriously fatal little two-shot pistols that won all arguments.

Not jerking, but moving smoothly, almost casually, Spanish Patch drew one plain black gun and tripped the firing pin. The smoke of the single blast swirled across the table, and Tierman dropped his cards and his cuffs. Blandly inquiring, Spanish Patch turned and gazed at the sheriff of Pierce, who was sipping a beer at the bar. "He pulled his sleeve-shooters on me. Did you see?"

The sheriff admitted he had seen it. He also allowed reluctantly that any man had the right to defend himself, most particularly from a gunman-gambler like Tierman. "But don't you stay here!" he told Spanish Patch. "You better move on!"

Spanish Patch nodded. He had done what he had come to do. "I'm pullin' out right now," he said, and got his Mexican branded horse, a good-looking grulla with savage bronc instincts, and he rode eastward, after tucking the silver ring back inside his shirt.

The disgruntled Pierce sheriff watched him go. "I reckon I'll send on warnin' about him," he told several citizens. "Lord knows what he done to prod up Tierman, but whatever it was he done it on purpose! He's bad, that bogus Mexican—too damn bad to live!"

IN THE town of Tailholt, on a prong of Devil's River, far from Pierce, Spanish Patch came to the end of his long trek. Along the thousand miles of his back-trail he left four bullet-broken men who had been given a sight of the silver ring, given a chance to shoot, and been out-gunned.

He bore the name now of a triggerman, a killer, a man to be avoided. His reputation traveled ahead of him, with his description, and lawmen watched warily for a tall man wearing vaquero garb and a black sombrero. So in Tailholt he knew that he was spotted as soon as he rode down the main street, from the way men looked at him.

Here was a quiet cowtown where nothing much had happened since the homesteaders' war. He looked it over, getting his bearings, remembering from years ago the location of the livery stable, the Blue Flag Emporium, the town marshal's office and tiny jail next door, and the Transit Stage Hotel across the street.

Here lay a problem for him to solve. Here lived two men, the last on his list, condemned by his verdict to see the silver ring that he kept tucked under his black shirt at the joined ends of the chin-strings of the black sombrero. To gun one would mean that he'd have to travel on, fast, leaving the other. He would have to get them both together, he decided, and drop the pair of them in one swift smoke-down.

He put up his grulla horse at the livery and walked over to the barroom of the Transit Stage. There were faces that he found familiar but for him there was no recognition. It was so long since he had fled this town and this Devil's River range, he guessed his name was forgotten. And he had been just a kid, a homesteader's brat, the skinny son of Doc Vance who had believed strongly in soil and toil

and credited wrongly the instincts of power-hungry men.

He stood at the bar, waiting, watching the back-bar mirror. His agate eyes flared for an instant when at last he saw Bern Corbin, wearing the badge of town marshal, quietly enter the barroom and stand thoughtfully studying him. It struck him that Corbin looked old and changed. Then their eyes met in the back-bar mirror, and without further pause the marshal came forward.

"I guess," he said, "you're the man they call Spanish Patch." There was a bluntness about him but no belligerence. He was big, heavy, gray-haired. He had penetrating blue eyes that seemed shadowed by an inner weariness. Almost mildly, he asked, "You here for any partic'lar reason, Mr. Patch?"

Patch nodded, his stare sardonic. "Yeah. Two reasons. You'll know about 'em in good time!" He sought for the saturnine humor in the situation. It was there. But for some reason it didn't shine for him.

Marshal Bern Corbin eyed him intently, probingly. "Two?" A flicker of apprehensive wonder crossed his face, born of a half-formed premonition. "I'll try to stop you!"

"I bet you will!" said Patch, and watched him leave the barroom and slowly cross the street to his office. There, he reminded himself, walked one of the last two men on his list. The other, Jobe Oberman, at the head of the list, would have to be lured out of his big stone house on the hill at the top of the main street, and the two brought together for that final . . .

Abruptly, he ceased figuring out ways and means. He glared at a man pacing down the street from the big stone house —a hard-faced, neat-looking man with light green eyes and a short, pointed beard: Jobe Oberman, president of the Oberman Land & Cattle Company, who had given the order to raid out the homesteaders of Devil's River range and whip the little cowmen into line. Part of the bloody task he had superintended personally, after obtaining a court order that declared the homesteaders in trespass, and getting his army of hired gunmen sworn in as deputies. His had been one of the brutal faces lighted by the flames of the burning Vance cabin, the night Doc Vance was shot down on his doorstep and his kid son had to break out, burn-scarred, and run the gantlet of quirts and boots before plunging into the brush and getting away.

Striding briskly, unaware of the agate eyes following him, Jobe Oberman, king of Devil's River range and master of Tailholt, turned in at the door of the marshal's office.

And Spanish Patch, his eyes blazing, walked out of the barroom and headed after him. "I've got 'em!" he muttered to himself. "Got 'em both, right together!"

THE office was small and poorly lighted, so that as soon as he stepped into the doorway he blocked the light from the sunny street and drew instant attention. With the sunlight behind him, he made a black silhouette.

Marshal Bern Corbin turned his head quickly, stared at him and moved away from his desk. Oberman, though, not knowing the stranger, snapped crisply, "Who're you and what d'you want?"

On the point of raising his chin and speaking the few words required, Patch looked past Oberman—not at Corbin, but at the girl beside him. He got an impression that she was a young girl with brown hair and brown eyes, but his feeling about her was a simple anger at her presence here. She spoiled the play. By merely being here, vulnerable to a chance bullet, she ruled out all prospect of a fight. She was gazing at him, vaguely disturbed, sensing the controlled violence and the threat contained in him.

Mechanically, Corbin said, "Mr. Patch, this is my daughter, Gail. And this is Mr. Oberman."

Patch nodded. "Howdy," he murmured, and left without another word. As he recalled, Corbin had no daughter, no family, at the time of the homesteaders' war.

After he left, there was silence until Oberman remarked, "So that was Spanish Patch, eh? Hell's gate! He nearly got us! If it hadn't been for Gail . . ." He looked at the girl. His light green eyes glowed. "My dear, the marshal and I have some confidential matters to discuss. Do you mind?"

She inclined her head. "Of course not. I must get supper."

When she was gone, Bern Corbin asked, "Why should that gunslinger be after us? He's a stranger to me."

"You're no stranger to him!" Oberman retorted. "Neither am I! That's what I came down to see you about. I heard he'd got here. Look at his record, you fool! Labaucher—Tierman—Lask—Harby—! All men we knew. Company men. There were six of us who went out and finished off that poverty-stricken doctor, remember? Me, you, and those four!"

"I'd like to forget that night," Corbin said shakenly. The shadows in his eyes were dark and tortured. "I've tried to. We were crazy drunk. Except you. It was murder!"

"Legal execution!" Oberman corrected coldly. "You've gone chicken these last few years, I've noticed. It won't help you! That doctor's brat got away, remember? I took a shot after him but he made it into the brush and screamed back that he'd get us all some day. We figured he went down to Mexico. We figured right! That's where he went. And now he's come back. He's back to get us! He's already got four of us. You and I are next, if he can get us together!"

Corbin sank heavily into the chair at his desk. "Are you sure? About him, I mean."

"Positive!" Oberman stated. "I've heard of a silver ring, an Indian ring, that he carries."

Corbin breathed deeply. "Doc Vance's big ring. Navajos gave it to him. For helping 'em through smallpox. Oh, God!"

Oberman frowned irritably. "Praying won't help now! We must get him before he gets us, understand? I'm calling in my best men: Ed Furl, Dace, Fogarty and the rest. They'll be your deputies. Show them the job and they'll do it! They'll be here before sundown. Incidentally, keep Gail out of here. I don't want her hurt."

Bern Corbin looked up. "Neither do I!" A smoldering rebellion, years old, flamed in his eyes. "Get Gail off your mind! She ain't for you! Don't push me too far, Oberman!"

Jobe Oberman smiled whitely at him. "My feeling for Gail," he said smoothly, carefully, "is that of an old friend. I am fond of her, as you are. Surely that's no cause for a quarrel. You're upset, Bern. Take it easy. My men will finish that fellow, don't worry. Everything will be taken care of."

He walked out, still smiling, and as he returned to his big rock house on the hill, he murmured, "Everything will be taken care of. Yes. Everything!" Rebellion was not to be tolerated. It had to be stamped out, before it spread and encouraged others.

CHAPTER TWO

Girl Hostage

SPANISH PATCH took a room at the hotel, tossed his small warsack in it and went out to the livery to see how his horse was doing. The grulla had been rubbed down and grained. It would be fit to travel when he needed it in a hurry.

Leaving the livery, from habit he paused and looked to left and right before stepping out. The marshal's girl was emerging from the general merchandise door of the Blue Flag Emporium, and she saw him at the same time he saw her. He touched his sombrero to her, trying to recall her name, and was surprised when she started impulsively toward him.

She was bareheaded, and in the unshadowed light he realized that she was unusually attractive. The late afternoon sun brought out rich hues in her soft hair, and her eyes reminded him oddly of clear wine in a Mexican amber glass held up to firelight. She halted before him, and with a mingling of courage and timidity she stammered, "We—we know who you are! We know what you've come to do!"

He gazed down at her. "Thanks for the warning, Miss Corbin."

She shook her head. "That isn't my name. I'm only Bern Corbin's adopted daughter. My name is Gail Romaine." Her eyes searched his for a sign of recognition.

He had to sieve his memory. While doing so, it suddenly occurred to him that he could recall without effort all the hated names and faces, but that his recollection of the others had dimmed. "Romaine? Gail Romaine? I remember." He grinned

quickly, and the change in his lean face brought a look of startled pleasure to the girl. "You stole my quirt."

"I didn't! You gave it to me!"

"I loaned you it, and you kept it. Loaned you my good buckskin coat, too, and you got it wet and tried to drv it by a fire. Fetched it back to me with the biggest patch in the world sewed on it! That's how my dad first got to calling me Patch. I kept that name, after I—" He stopped. The chill stare re-entered his eyes, and his mouth was again flat and unsmiling. "What happened over in your section?"

She looked away. "We saw the fire of your father's cabin. The men started over. They met some company riders in the dark. You can guess the rest!" For a moment she was silent. Then she said, "Please go away, Patch! It's all been over for years. It's best forgotten."

He said somberly, "It's too big to forget. It's always with me, that night. I can see my dad lying dead. He never owned a gun in his life. He was a healer, not a killer."

She touched his arm, hesitated again, repelled by the sinister hardness of his face. "Would he have wanted his son to be a killer? You, Patch! The boy I thought of as the most kind, gay, understanding . . . Look at you now!"

He shrugged tiredly. "Things change a fellow."

"Bern Corbin has changed," she said swiftly. "I know he was just a drunken gunman then. But something that night changed him. He took me in. Adopted me. He's been a good, kind, generous father to me."

"Salve for his black conscience!" Patch snarled.

"Perhaps," she admitted. "But now he's even trusted and liked by the cowmen-settlers he helped to break. If they can forgive, why can't you?"

He shook his head, scowling. "It's asking too much. I've lived and planned for this. I've ridden for the toughest fighting outfits in Mexico, just for the training and the experience. I kept those faces and names in my mind all the time, swearing that when I was ready I'd come back and hunt 'em down. Well, I found four of 'em! Two more to go, then I'm through!"

"Then you're through, yes! After that —what?"

"I don't much care to look that far ahead!"

She turned blindly, her eyes swimming, and walked away. And he watched her go, wishing with desperate, hopeless rage that everything were different, that his life could have been of another kind. In spite of what he had said, he was shaken in his deadly resolve. He felt for once undecided as to the certainty of his course. Gail Romaine had succeeded, better than she knew, in planting a doubt in him, and in causing him to recall the good days and the faces of friends.

HE LOOKED around, remembering that the beer counter in the rear of the Blue Flag Emporium had always been the town gathering-place of small cowmen-settlers, homesteaders, and others of the struggling tribe to which his father had given his services and support. It was time he dropped in on them. Maybe they could set him right.

The back door was familiar, scarred from boots shoving it open. He went on in, and there was a plain counter, the smell of beer and tobacco, and men lacking the swagger of cowpokes and company hirelings.

There had been talk as he opened the door. Now it was hushed. They were looking him over. He was a strange breed here, in his vaquero garb, black sombrero, heavy guns and buscadero belt, and they were reserved men who'd had to learn caution. He ordered a beer.

Suds Joley, who never sold anything else, drew the beer, shook his head at the dime, and put his bare elbows on the counter. He was a stout man with hair everywhere except on his huge round head. He remarked without much expression, "There's a kinda whisper goin' round that you're Doc Vance's son. Right or wrong?"

Spanish Patch raised his chin. They gazed at the silver ring with the blue turquoise and Indian symbols, and all noded. All knew that ring, and knew how Doc Vance had earned it. It had been the most distinctive thing about him, and he wore it, he said, to refute the charge that Indians had no gratitude.

Suds Joley served three beers and came

back. "The gen'ral opinion is you're here to settle your score." He took Patch's glass and refilled it. "We're glad to see you. We'll be more glad to see you go!"

"Why?" Patch asked.

"Because, for one thing, Bern Corbin long ago made his peace with us," said Joley. "We got a pretty high opinion of him now. An' what we think o' Gail—well, it'd make poetry! For another thing, you'll never beat Oberman. He's got way too much help. You try it, an' it'll only stir things up again. He might even take it for cause to turn the wolf loose on us again. We all got enough o' that! I should think you got enough, too! You were hit hardest of any, except Gail. Your dad, God rest him, was murdered. You were burned out an'—"

The door burst open and five men clumped in, wearing deputies' badges, their hands resting openly on the butts of their holstered guns. The first one in barked, "Who was murdered? Who got burned out? Still talkin' up old grudges, are you, Joley? Huntin' up trouble, eh?"

Joley backed up from the counter, shaking his head. "Now, fellers, you got me wrong! Honest truth, Furl, you got me wrong!"

Furl, a gaunt man with cavernous eyes, advanced to the counter. "I get you right!" he flung back, and reached over and hit him with a gunbarrel. He turned swiftly, and with the other four of the squad he eyed Spanish Patch.

Waiting, his eyes ranging over theirs, Patch stood unmoving. They had been sent to crowd him into a fight, he knew. He was ready, but he was not going to explode unless he had to. Not here, where there was nothing to be gained. Not in this room where a score of men, mostly unarmed, would be trapped by the gunfire of the berserk five.

Furl fiddled with his draw gun, and finally, slowly, he holstered it. His four companions took note. One of them, a smiling, flashy-garbed young redhead, breathed an oath of disappointment and stared with a fool's intolerance first at Furl and than at Spanish Patch. Furl turned on the customers.

"Any more here want the same treatment? Looks like it's about time you damn two-bit scrubs got kicked in line again! Hangin' round back rooms, mutterin' an' plottin' against the company! Why, you bunch o' . . . " He cursed them up and down.

The crowd stood silent, taking it, shamed and flushed and impotent, like convicts under a bullying guard. They hardly shifted, after the armed and badged five stalked noisily out. Suds Joley got up, holding his gashed head in one hand, with the other automatically wiping the counter.

At last Spanish Patch said, "Now I know how licked men can get! I never would've believed it! Don't fret, you poor paper-backs, I won't start trouble for you! I'm getting out o' this town just as soon as I can! Oberman can have it!" He threw two dimes to Suds Joley as he walked out. "For the beer. Nobody in this kind o' company can buy me a drink!"

IT WAS dusk now. Patch went around the side of the Blue Flag Emporium to the street, paused before stepping out, and spotted the five deputies in front of the livery stable.

"Aim to make another try, maybe?" he muttered to himself. "Orders from Oberman? Well, if they want it—!" He headed on over to the hotel for his warsack, in full view of them. His decision was made. He was leaving right away. But maybe they had different plans.

They sighted him immediately. The trigger-crazy young redhead made a sudden shift of his hands. Patch slowed, and leveled a gravely inquiring glance at him. He caused him to study his fingernails, and went on into the hotel. The youth's self-conscious cackle followed him into the lobby.

The desk clerk, a yawning kid, gave Patch his room key and handed him a sealed note that he said he'd found on the desk with his name on it. Patch took it to his room, but he didn't bother to make a light. By holding it close to the window he still had light enough to read by. He unfolded the note and read:

I order you to get out of this town. At nine tonight I will start my rounds, as usual. If you are still here, I and my deputies will come for you. Oberman will be with me.

B. Corbin, City Marshal.

He read it through twice, and laughed harshly at the ironic reflection that the pair he had stalked to this town were now out to stalk him, with all their gunmen at heel. He thought of Gail's pleading, her tears, her earnest protests that Bern Corbin was a changed man. Joley, too, as spokesman for the whipped settlers and scrub cowmen of Devil's River, had talked up for Corbin.

"Changed?" Patch muttered. "The hell he's changed!" There were the company gunmen openly on the prod, wearing badges as Corbin's deputies. Facts outweighed words. Corbin was still Oberman's tool.

Raising his eyes from the note and inspecting the darkening street outside, he discovered that the Furl gun-team had moved back into the livery stable. Their faces made five pale blurs in the darkness just inside the wide entrance. They were peering up at his window, hoping, he guessed, that he would show a light and make a target of himself. Meantime, they barred him from his grulla horse.

He became aware, too, of other watching men, two on each side of the livery and one at the corner of the Blue Flag. How many more were lying in wait, beyond his field of vision, was a grim question. He crunched the note in his hand, and shrugged wryly at it, knowing that it was not an ultimatum, but a sentence of death.

Well, he had come here to gun it out with Oberman and Corbin, he mused. He had changed his mind, but they didn't know it, and in doing so he had made the fatal error of giving them time to gather their forces and take the offensive. Men could pile blunder upon blunder, but a gunfighter was allowed only one mistake.

He was hemmed in. There wasn't a ghost of a chance of his getting out of this town. The note, with its order that he leave, was a mocking invitation for him to try it or choose the alternative of waiting until nine o'clock to die. He faced the issue, pondered on it, and laughed again. So it had to be. Of his own will he had come to kill or be killed, and they, the proposed victims, were holding him to it. He was committed to try to do what he had come to do, regardless of Gail's tears and the fears of the Devil's River scrubs. This was the end of the years of gun-training and the long trek. It had to be.

He went down to the hotel barroom. It was almost empty and the bartender, by his worried nervousness, showed that he knew something was building toward a blow-up. Patch ordered a drink and took a quick look into the street. Except for the silent, watching men, it too was nearly deserted. Lighted windows were few.

Patch sipped his drink, making it last. On the dot, he would walk out there. He wouldn't be found skulking in his room, like a trapped wolf snarling in a cave. He would be out there, meeting the hunters halfway and a notch farther if he could make it.

AT NINE o'clock Patch said to the bartender, "Turn your lamps out for a minute."

"What for?" the bartender asked anxiously. "Now, look, mister! I don't know what your trouble is, an' I want no part of it!"

Message from Garcia

Texas Artist Tells Why It's Smart to Switch to Calvert

SAN ANTONIO, Texas—Tony R. Garcia, San Antonio artist and illustrator, knows that it's *taste* that counts in a whiskey. "Tell everybody," he says, "that I switched to Calvert because of its *mild, and smooth taste.*"

CALVERT RESERVE BLENDED WHISKEY—86.8 PROOF—65% GRAIN NEUTRAL SPIRITS. CALVERT DISTILLERS CORP., N.Y.C.

"I guess you don't," Patch told him. "I'm goin' now. But I don't figure to go through any lighted doorways tonight, that's all! Now douse those lamps, eh?"

"Oh!" The bartender nodded relievedly. "I get you. Okay." He hurriedly extinguished every light.

"*Gracias,*" Patch murmured, and eased out without a sound.

Hardly a light showed anywhere. It was impossible to detect the slightest sign of lurking men. They were keeping quiet and motionless, wherever they were. There was nothing to indicate that they existed, but his sharply acute senses warned him insistently of their presence, and reason told him that they at least knew he had come out. The turning out of the barroom lamps, necessary though it was, should have put them on the alert.

He prowled down the dark and silent street, treading softly, pausing often to listen and stare intently about him. The darkness, ally and enemy, hid him, but also hid from him the peril that lurked in it. At each step, each instant, he tensed expectantly for gunfire to flare at him from any direction. But each slow, noiseless step, he hoped, took him closer to Oberman and Corbin. The message said they'd be together, but he didn't doubt they banked on the gun deputies shooting him to rags before he got anywhere near them.

Gripping his attention like a sudden blare of trumpets, the sound of footsteps and voices came to him from farther down the street. Advancing, he heard Corbin remark to his companion. "Lights are out in the hotel barroom. Wonder why? Hardly a light anywhere, come to that."

They were about abreast of the hay-and-grain store, Patch judged. He could just manage to make them out where they came to a pause on the boardwalk, two men, one taller than the other. Then somebody across the street whistled.

It was a piercing whistle. Guessing at what it signified, Patch ran forward. But the shorter figure moved swiftly and vanished around the store. The taller one, Corbin, remained, and he must have heard Patch coming, for he called, "Hey, who're you? Was that you whistled? Something's got into Oberman! I was talkin' to him, an' all of a sudden—"

Oberman's voice interrupted him from a distance. "You fool, that's Spanish Patch coming at you!" And after that the shouted command: "All right, boys—give it!"

A ragged explosion of gunfire shredded the hush of the darkened town. Patch's sombrero spun half around and canted over his left eye, and another bullet cut the chin-string. Corbin clapped a hand to the side of his neck, and bellowed angrily, "Hey, you sons are cuttin' me down with him!"

"That's the chance a marshal takes when a badman's in town," Oberman called back mockingly. "Give it again, boys!"

PATCH leaped past Corbin, his plain guns out, in search of cover. The pack was spilled and everything had gone to hell, but he hoped to live long enough to get off a shot at Oberman. He crossed the mouth of a narrow alley. A gun roared at him from it. His punished sombrero quit his head and flapped behind him, caught by the single chin-string and the silver ring tucked into his shirt.

His scalp seemed weighted, and he knew that the bullet had clipped him. He knew, too, that Corbin was pounding along behind him, seeking cover, like himself. Somebody hammered a twice-told tune from a double-barreled shotgun, and that filled the measure. Patch caved in the first shop window he came to, with a swipe of a gunbarrel, and dived in. Before he could extricate himself from various unknown objects and pick himself up, Bern Corbin dived in after him and landed on his back.

Patch got his breath, heaved the lawman off and growled, "You after me, or with me, which?"

"I dunno yet," muttered Corbin, fumbling around.

The business establishment that they had forcibly entered was, as they soon learned, Belvoir Abinger's tailor shop, the Shoppe a la mode for Gentlemen. Mr. Abinger did not assume that all, or any, of his customers were gentlemen—far be it—but he publicly bestowed upon them that title and kept his private opinions to himself.

Mr. Abinger's chief contribution to culture consisted of his having imported into Tailholt some tailor's dummies which,

while not precisely of cowpuncher type and shade, were perfectly able to illustrate what a well-dressed cowpuncher should look like on a Saturday night at the local dance. The dummies were beautiful and, taking their neat mustaches into consideration, practically masculine.

Patch tangled with one of them. It was known locally as Reginald, and was the one customarily garbed in a high linen collar, starched, and black broadcloth. He threw it to a fall, straddled it, and after Corbin landed on him it got limp in the middle.

"What the hell d'you want here?" Patch queried Corbin, after extricating himself from Reginald. "I got your note. I don't know why I shouldn't blow you apart, 'cept Gail didn't seem to want it."

"Note? What note?" Corbin got to his knees, and lined his gun on the shattered front window. "I don't know anything about any note. I was making my reg'lar rounds, an' Oberman came an' talked with me. Then there was that whistle—then you! What note?"

"Never mind," Patch said. "I guess Oberman wrote it. That *cabron!* Looks to me like he's crossed you up. That comes damn near being funny! You make deputies of his jiggers, an' he uses 'em to put you in the jackpot along with me! You'll be written off as killed in the line o' duty while trying to arrest Spanish Patch. I could laugh at you!"

"Laugh an' be damned!" Corbin dabbed at his neck. "I didn't make 'em my deputies. Oberman passed out the badges an' didn't even bother to tell me how many. You don't know what it's like to marshal a one-man town. I've tried to steer a middle course. It ain't been easy!"

A shadow edged up against the smashed window. Patch slung a shot at it, and it fell away. In response, a storm of exploding cartridges broke out all around the tailor's shop, splintering the flimsy wallboards and whipping off the jagged fragments of the front window. When it subsided, Patch raised himself up cautiously from the floor, beside Corbin, and slammed four rapid shots into a slackening group of gun-flashes on the far side of the street. Somebody cursed loudly, and there was the sound of a heavy fall on the boardwalk.

The side-flash of his kicking gun stung Corbin, who crawled back, grumbling, "You new crop o' quick-load cutters sure spend shells fast! In my old cap-an'-ball days we had to be powder misers an' make every slug pay for itself!"

"Might's well spend the belt-full an' call it a day!" Patch commented.

In the lull following his shots they heard talk. For what seemed a long time, those outside satisfied themselves with only an occasional blast. Once, during a period of quiet, there was a far-away sound like a cry, a scream, muffled and broken off.

CHAPTER THREE

One-Man Army

AT LAST came footsteps along the boardwalk. They paused, and Oberman called, "Corbin! What are you doing in there? Come on out, man, if you're still alive!"

"Not while your jiggers are makin' no difference between me an' Patch!" Corbin bellowed.

"Nonsense!" Oberman returned coolly. "These are your deputies. They'll take care of you, don't worry. By the way, you'll be relieved to know that I've had Gail taken up to my house—for her protection!" He smothered a laugh with a cough. "I'm going back there now to see that she's—"

"What?" Bern Corbin lunged to his feet and started toward the door.

Patch grabbed him by an ankle and brought him sprawling. "Hold it!" he growled. "That's about what he figures on! It's what they're all waiting for out there!"

Corbin struggled, striking at him. "You think I'm goin' to stay here? While she's in that house? With him?"

"No," Patch said. "I'm going out there with you! But first we give 'em something to shoot at. Catch y'self one o' these clothes-corpses. I got thisn' I fell on. Okay? Come on!"

He yanked open the front door, blazed a shot, and heaved out Reginald. Corbin followed suit with a wooden manikin wearing a checked suit and gray derby. In the darkness the two figures looked like a pair of men diving out into the street, and they got what was waiting. Guns

crashed, and before they rolled on the boardwalk Reginald and his dapper associate had become badly damaged goods.

The voice of the redheaded young killer whooped, "Score two, fellers!"

"Shut down, Sunset!" Furl rasped. "Well, well, looks like that Patch man has done killed our marshal! Ain't that hell, though?"

"Sure is!" came a chorus, with a few low-pitched laughs here and there. They moved forward from all quarters, the Oberman crew, crowding through the darkness. Furl scratched a match and bent forward. He was the only one who got anything like a look at the punctured puppets, and in the light of the match his face was ludicrous.

"Now!" Patch muttered to Corbin, and they leaped out, firing together.

Furl jerked upright in time to have the lighted match blown from his fingers. He reeled across the fallen dummies, a man with only minutes to live, and fell cursing. The mob, utterly astounded and confused, broke apart, and Patch and Corbin smashed through them like charging bulls.

The darkness cloaked them, two shapes indistinguishable from the others, but not for long. Up the street they raced, lawman and outlaw sharing one purpose—to reach that big rock house on the hill. They got as far as the Blue Flag when the redhead, Sunset, shrilled savagely, "There they go, makin' for the livery!"

"Livery, hell!" swore somebody. "They're after the boss! Get 'em!"

The street became a roaring funnel of gunfire. Corbin, running, fell against Patch, and reeled off, striving like a drunken man to keep to his feet. He fetched up against the front of the livery stable, and put his back to it, legs braced. "You keep goin'!" he growled.

Patch spun around to him. "Hurt bad?"

"I'm slowed some," Corbin admitted. "Get along. Aim to show how we burned powder in my young days! Follow you if I can . . ." He raised his big old .44 Dragoon. It blared once, and somewhere a man uttered a gasping cry.

"Not bad," Patch granted. "See you later." He didn't expect to see him later or at any time. But it wasn't necessary to mention that to a shot-up old ex-owlhooter who had come to his last stand. Patch kept on up the street, toward the house.

The Oberman house was lighted up, and the wide front door hung open. Oberman stood on the high porch. Below, three men lounged outside the painted fence that enclosed the only front lawn in Tailholt. They were all staring down the dark street, trying vainly to make out how matters were going.

"Damned queer!" Oberman called to the three. "As I came up, I heard them crowing that they had downed those two. Say, Alstad, go on down and find out why they're still shooting."

"Okay," Alstad answered. "Here's somebody comin' up, though. Guess he'll know." He left the fence and came toward Patch, a rifle resting in the crook of his arm. "What's boilin' down there? The boss says . . ." He stopped, his head thrust forward like an inquiring turtle. "Hey, what the hell! *It's him—Spanish Patch!*"

PATCH got an instant's perception of the rifle-barrel slicing around to line up on him. Of the two men lunging away from the fence, digging for their holsters. Of Oberman promptly whirling into the house and slamming the door.

He cut his guns up and fired. With three moving targets and the tiniest margin of time, he knew how the chances ran against him, and because of their positions he had to give Alstad the first blast. Alstad, swinging the rifle, tottered backward and swung it way high, and he went over, holding onto it, like a capsizing boat with one mast. Patch ran forward, seeking to rattle the other two.

They didn't rattle any too well for him. They crouched in the sudden haze of their gunsmoke, intent on stopping him, and he stumbled and his shots went wild. His feet couldn't seem to keep up with the forward lunge of his body, and he took a running sprawl. Flopping over, elbows on the ground, he took deliberate aim.

They rattled then. One of them went into a weird pattern of dodging, zig-zagging backward on his toes. The other blew up entirely, and fled. Patch put a stop to the dodger, and let the other go. As he got up painfully, a pistol spurted down at him from an upstairs window of the house. He sucked in his breath, got to the fence, leaned on it, and emptied his

guns at the window. Oberman was there.

There wasn't time to reload. Corbin couldn't be expected to do more than bring a momentary pause to that advancing mob of gunslinging pseudo-deputies. Patch picked up Alstad's rifle, pushed open the fence gate and tramped to the house. He couldn't hurry any more. There was a dragging weight in all his movements that he guessed would get heavier. He slowly climbed the steps to the porch.

The front door was locked. "Comin' after you, Oberman!" he muttered, and wrecked the lock with a bullet from the rifle.

He thrust open the door and lurched on in. The pistol spurted at him again from somewhere. It had the flat and solid sound of a short-barreled pocket pistol. He would have to locate it. "Ram it down his damn throat!" he said aloud, glaring about him.

He was in a large, lighted room, well furnished and carpeted, the main room of a rich man's house. The many panel mirrors confused him at first, for he glimpsed several images of himself in them, and even to himself he looked like a bloodstained bandit. His black shirt and pants had picked up sand that clung to the bloody splotches. His sombrero was bullet-holed, and from the one remaining chin-string the silver ring dangled aimlessly. His face was a fright. The rifle in his hands was no reassuring touch, either.

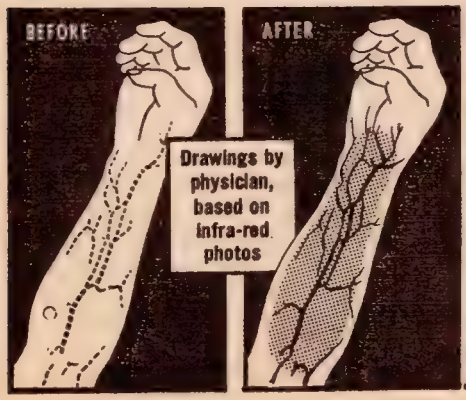
His spooky appearance must have shaken Oberman's nerve a little, for the next shot from the pistol hit the face of a tall clock and started it chiming madly. Patch veered away from the clock and spotted Oberman. There was a small ornamental balcony reached by a curving staircase, at the far end of the room, and inside a doorway up there Oberman was taking sight again, his pale green eyes glittering over the pistol.

Patch tipped the rifle and fired fast, without time for aim. He saw Oberman step back and vanish, and he crossed the room and tramped up the curving staircase. The door banged shut, then silently, furtively opened a crack. Patch put two bullets through it and mounted onto the balcony.

Behind the door Oberman rasped furiously, "Damn you, don't come through! I'll kill you! I'll—" His voice cracked. He was no longer a crisp, coolly hard man, giving orders to lesser men. His streak of weakness was at last laid naked, and he had become the hunted one, snarling, threatening, skulking in an unlighted room behind a closed door.

PATCH kicked the door. It refused to open. He put the muzzle of the rifle to the lock and pulled the trigger. No report came. The loads were shot. The rifle was empty, like his sixguns. He clubbed it, swung the butt against the door, and while he smashed the door down, the pistol spat through it from the other side.

He broke in. The room, evidently a library and study, had no light, but sufficient came through from the main room below for him to see Oberman crouching by a writing desk, feverishly reloading his pistol. Oberman ducked, and Patch, striking at him with the rifle butt, hit the desk



HOW SLOAN'S LINIMENT AIDS MUSCULAR PAINS

Here's vital news for sufferers from muscular aches and rheumatic pains. Using infra-red rays, scientists have now succeeded in photographing blood-vessels *below the skin-surface.* These photos (see pictures at left) prove that, after an application of Sloan's Liniment, the veins *expand* . . . evidence that the treated area gets *extra* supplies of blood, to revitalize tissues and wash away waste matter and poisons faster.

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a wallop. Shock ran up his arms.

Patch caught his balance, stumbled around, and saw Oberman scuttling out onto the balcony. Oberman was limping and holding his left arm close to his side. He was cursing in a sobbing, raging voice.

Using all the strength he could gather, Patch hurled the empty rifle after him, and as he did so he got a glimpse of Bern Corbin lurching through the front door. The rifle struck Oberman with such force he pitched headlong out onto the balcony and crashed into the outside railing.

The splintering of the railing as it gave way brought Corbin's head up. The blue, penetrating eyes showed no deep shadows in them now. They were vacant. The big, heavy body swayed to a standstill, and Bern Corbin, dying on his feet, raised his old Dragoon in both hands and fired. He was a man who spent shells carefully, and Oberman tumbled limpy through the broken railing down to the floor below.

Fumbling shells from his buscadero belt and poking them into his guns, Patch called, "Don't know where Gail is. Where you reckon he'd put her?"

Corbin didn't reply. He stood gazing at nothing. Then his knees folded. It was a dead man that the Oberman squad, bursting in pursuit, fired into. It was still a live one who fired down at them from the balcony, though for how long he wasn't guessing.

In the roil of violence and noise, he was shooting without anger, without passion, lying flat on the balcony floor. Anger and passion were dead and behind him, as dead as Bern Corbin. As dead as Oberman, Labaucher, all the rest. These men, storming the curving staircase, they didn't count. He would hold them off as long as he could, because Gail was somewhere here in the house. But they didn't count. And when they realized that Oberman, their paymaster, was finished, they'd know they didn't count.

His eyes fogged. That, he reminded himself, was the worst danger. But what did you do about it? You reloaded, grooved your shots, spent your shells. But you needed eyes, and they had to be good. His were getting bad. Fogged. Cloudy.

They were shooting the lights out. Or was it his eyes? Surely it was getting dark. And the smoke was bad. It made the scene below swim hazily. It divided it, or maybe doubled it, into two scenes. There was the noisy squad howling right beneath, and another squad rushing in.

He got an insane impression of seeing Suds Joley's shining bald head. His eyes failed and the last of the light went out.

SOMETHING burned his throat. He tasted it cautiously and found it not too unfamiliar. It occurred to him to open his eyes and find if they still worked. He tried it, and they did.

Suds Joley, serving whiskey for the first time in his life, drew the bottle from Patch's mouth and inquired gruffly, "Think you'll live?"

Patch wasn't sure. He wasn't sure he cared to. He wasn't sure of anything. "What're you doin' here?" he asked Joley. Past Joley he saw other men. Men of the back beer-room of the Blue Flag Emporium. Homesteaders. Cowmen-settlers. Devil's River scrubs. Their presence here in the Oberman house puzzled him. He said, his mind mired, "You paper-backs don't belong here. This is a fight!"

"So?" Suds Joley stared down stonily at him. "Why, damn your gunsmoked soul to Satan, you'd be a cold cutter now if we hadn't taken a hand! What you think we're doin' here?"

"You?" Patch blinked up at him. "Don't tell me it put the starch back in you, what happened today!"

"It wasn't that," Joley glowered. "Not Furl an' his pals bargin' into my beer bar. We're used to that. It wasn't what you said to us, either, though that riled us plenty. It was Bern Corbin, standin' there in the street, holdin' off the whole mob. An' it was Gail."

"Where is she?"

"Safe home now. She busted a window an' got up on the roof, here. She yelled bloody murder—said did we expect you an' Bern to handle all our fight! So I grabbed my bung-starter an' raised the yell! So we came." Joley breathed a beer-laden breath in Patch's face. "Oberman's jiggers saw the light, an' they've took off. Next time you pay me for a beer I'll make you eat the dime! I didn't like that, feller. I sure didn't!"

"Sorry," Patch muttered. "It won't happen again, Suds."

After he got away from them, while

they were rousing up the town medico who for personal convenience lived four miles out, he made it to the livery by sliding along walls. His good grulla was fit to ride, if he could get the saddle on him. Lifting the saddle that high was pretty tough. He tried sliding it on. The grulla wasn't used to that, and its bronco instincts urged it to hoof the head off this stumbling, fumbling man who smelled frighteningly of blood.

Patch, dragging the heavy Mexican saddle, was arguing with the grulla in fluent and slightly profane Spanish, when Suds Joley and some others closed in around him.

"Look, we don't want no more troubles," Joley said. "We've had enough. So've you. Here on, this country is likely to be a real nice place for fellers to settle down in. It's fine country. You should know, Vance."

"Talkin' to me?" Patch asked, struggling with his saddle. "No— not me! Hell with it!"

Another hand pushed the saddle down, throwing him off his teetering balance. He turned angrily and looked into the face of Gail. She said, "Don't go, Patch!"

He said, "That's not what you asked me, few hours ago!"

"I know." She took the saddle from him, and laid it down. "Things change. I want you to stay. We all do."

He reached for support, and found it on her shoulder. It was difficult to find the energy to argue. "I'm all you said. Gunman! Killer!"

"Yes," she said. "Yes, Patch. So was Bern Corbin, my foster father. A gunman. A killer. But he changed and we learned to respect him. We—we regarded him pretty highly. Didn't we, Suds?"

"Aw, let's quit arguin'," said Suds Joley. "Look, Gail, you've told me you still got a quirt he gave you. Maybe you better go get it!"

"Maybe he couldn't take it," Gail said. "Not just right now." The lantern light brought out rich hues in her soft hair, and her eyes were remindful of clear wine in a Mexican amber glass held up to the firelight.

"Maybe you're right," said Spanish Patch, and forgot about the saddle, the wicked-tempered grulla, and that long, long trek up and across by way of the old San Pedro smugglers' trail.

THE END

KILLER, TRY AGAIN!

KELLEHER moved eastward along Trail Street, walking slowly in the gathering dusk. He carried himself with an air of grave assurance while on his face was stamped a look of quiet pride. But his eyes were shadowed, as if he were searching endlessly for something which he had never been able to find.

Twin guns sagged in embossed holsters around his hips. The butts of the heavy .44s were turned forward in readiness for a cross draw. He wore hand-tooled boots, a white silk shirt and a dove-gray Stetson. A marshal's badge glittered on his fine calfskin vest.

Sending the lawless to quick damnation was Marshal Kelleher's business. . . . He did a cool, merciless job of it —until the day he first knew fear!

He walked carefully making his rounds, as was his way, his head cocked forward a bit while he listened to the quiet pulsing beat of the town. It was still early and the tempo was slow and even. As the night aged the pulse would quicken. Always he hoped it would stop short of the danger point.

A row of cool green cottonwoods marched down the center of Trail Street. The south side was Kelleher's territory—and his responsibility. Town law said no guns would be worn north of the row of trees—and oddly enough this law was respected.

Reaching the last cottonwood, which indicated the end of the street, Kelleher paused. To the west, on the slow rise across the river, two big trail herds up from Texas were camped on the bedding grounds. Cowboys in search of amusement after the long and dusty trail up through the Nations from the great southwest would hit town tonight. They would be a salty crew, and perhaps there would be shooting. Lights might be shot out and the men responsible would be arrested and would pay damages. It would be as simple as that.

These cowboys and what they might do didn't disturb Kelleher. But there were other men, not cowhands. These were the men he had to watch. Starting back along the street, he walked more quickly, his mind eased somewhat. For an hour or two he could relax.

Bunting fluttered in the evening breeze. Lights—red, green and blue—swung on poles along the high boardwalk. Red and green fire barrels were spaced evenly in front of the gaudy false-fronted buildings, which were saloons, dancehalls and gambling houses.

Remembering something, Kelleher paused in front of the Casino. He pushed inside. The big dancehall was cheap and tawdry. It was too early for the place to be crowded; most of the girls were still upstairs. Big Jake Bardon, the owner, leaned at one end of the bar.

"Tim Rourke will be in town," Kelleher told him. "I don't want trouble, Jake."

Jake Bardon, a slope-shouldered man with an ugly look in his eyes, bent his gaze on Kelleher. "Tell him to keep out of my place, Ben."

"You're a fool, Jake. This is a free country."

"Fool or not, tell him to keep away."

"Tim Rourke's in love with Jeannie. You can't stop that."

"She's under contract to me," Bardon said. "Rourke comes in here and moons around without spending a dime."

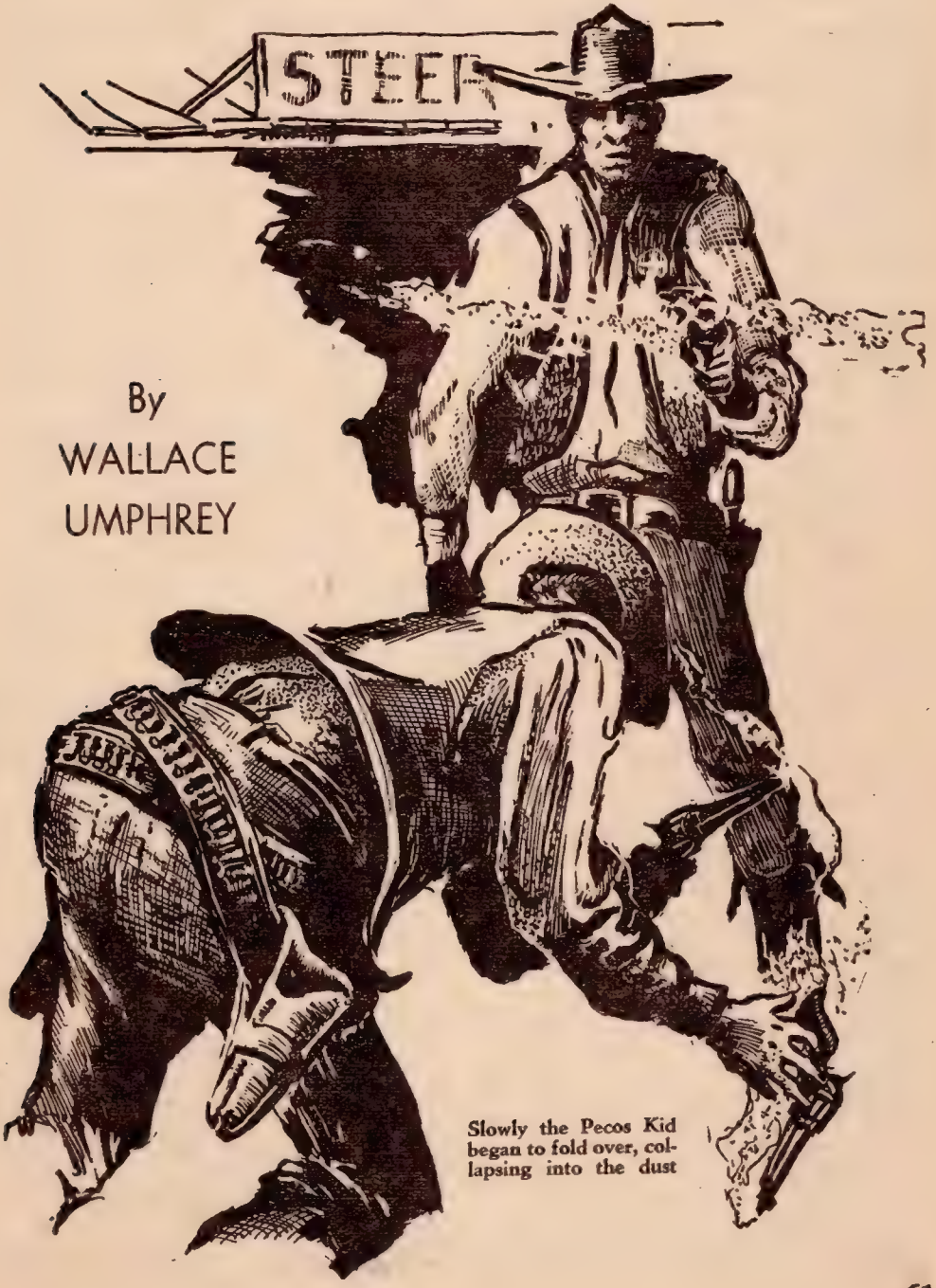
"Maybe he hasn't a dime to spend. It's not right for you to lick him every time

you two meet. He ain't your size."

Big Jake Bardon smiled. "He always starts it when I try to throw him out. I know what's best for my girls, Ben."

"You better know what's best for *you*," Kelleher told him. "If I had my way, I'd close this deadfall and run you out of town."

TURNING away before Jake Bardon could answer, Kelleher resumed his journey. When he reached the Steerhorn



By
WALLACE
UMPHREY

Slowly the Pecos Kid began to fold over, collapsing into the dust

saloon, he entered. This was the place where Kelleher always chose to relax.

The noise was subdued. Kerosene lamps, swinging from chains and gimbals, hung from the ceiling. Half a dozen men bellied against the bar. Only one was a stranger to Kelleher. Three men were playing poker at a green-covered table. Behind a roulette layout, at the moment receiving no play, sat a girl on a high stool.

The stranger at the bar was lean and muscular, his tall body slack now as he held a shot glass in one hand. A hardcase, Kelleher thought, and his mind weighed the problem carefully.

Suddenly he gave it up. His eyes shifted toward the roulette layout. The girl was watching him, one red lip caught up between her teeth. She was tall, maybe in her middle twenties, wearing a shimmering white dress. Kelleher felt a strange stirring inside him, the feeling he always got when he saw her. His measured tread carried him to the table.

"How's tricks, Babe?"

"I can't complain. How does everything look tonight?"

Her voice was throaty and she was smiling. Her greenish eyes were aloof. And somehow she seemed withdrawn from the atmosphere around her, as if she were untouched by the hard environment.

"Everything's under control," Kelleher told her, looking down at his polished boots, pride touching his voice.

Babe Collins appraised him coolly. "Isn't it always? Aren't you the great Ben Kelleher—fastest man with a gun west of the 'Sippi?"

His eyes, a little hurt, came up quickly. "That wasn't necessary, Babe."

"I'm sorry, Ben. But it's your reputation." She leaned forward. "There are a lot who would like to inherit your crown."

His hands clenched at his sides. It had always been that way. There were always men wanting to prove they were better than all other men. There were those who could build up their own ego only by trying to outdraw and outshoot the great Ben Kelleher.

She was still leaning forward, her dark eyes searching his face. "You have a ranch, Ben. You'd like to settle down. You've been a lawman for a long time. Ben, just what are you looking for?"

A coldness touched him. "We've got off to a bad start tonight," he said, shaking his head. "Well, see you later."

At the poker table he sat down in an empty chair, swinging his holsters around so that his guns rested more comfortably in his lap. He was glad of the rest. The three men already seated nodded at him with reserve, neither friendly nor unfriendly. Kelleher's eyes darkened. They simply accepted him for what he was: a fast man with a gun, an excellent marshal, but a man they couldn't know.

The plump owner of the Steerhorn spoke respectfully. "Take a few hands, Ben?"

Kelleher nodded. "I feel lucky tonight. Deal me in."

They played in silence, the way men play who know and like the game. Kelleher dropped out of the first two pots. On the next draw he caught a pair and played them hard. It was the winning hand and he raked in the chips. The deal came to him.

His long fingers began shuffling the cards. The deck split and went together in a flowing rhythm. He accepted the cut and dealt.

Again he won. There was no sense of elation in his victory, only an unnamed gnawing inside him. Once more the deal went around. Kelleher kicked back his chair and stood up.

"I've had enough," he told them. "Cash me in."

The game resumed. Nobody had asked him to stay. He had the feeling that the interlude should mean something, but it didn't. A restlessness was in him. He crossed to the bar, lonely in the knowledge that this was the price demanded of him for wearing a lawman's badge.

KELLEHER found himself standing next to the stranger at the bar. He cast a casual glance at the stranger. The man tensed, his face flushed.

The stranger left the bar, stopping for a moment to watch the poker game. There was a meaning here that eluded Kelleher. He turned his attention to the glass in front of him.

It came slowly out of the dim recesses of his mind. Suddenly the pattern was

clear. There was a shocked silence, and then Babe's throaty voice. His drink still untasted, Kelleher turned to see the stranger facing Babe across the roulette layout. He was leaning forward, and now he whispered something. Babe's eyes flashed and her palm landed flush on his cheek.

There was something both precise and deadly in the rhythm of Kelleher's tread. Silence walked beside him. The stranger had turned to face Kelleher, smiling lopsidedly, thumbs hooked into his gun belts. To Kelleher the pattern was very clear.

"Can't you tell a lady when you see one?" Kelleher asked.

The man's lips lifted. "A lady?"

"Get out," Kelleher told him evenly.

"You're Kelleher. Well, I'm not afraid of your rep." The man laughed without mirth. "Maybe you'd like to put me out."

Kelleher's mind was cold and certain. This was all a familiar thing. It was not a question of putting the man out. It seemed quite suddenly unreal and foolish, a man traveling hundreds of dusty miles for just such a showdown.

The silence fell apart. Men scrambled for safety, and nobody offered to back Kelleher because it was not the way. Babe gasped, and the sound cut into Kelleher's consciousness, but his eyes remained fixed on the stranger.

There was no signal. It was only a feeling, something measured by the senses alone. Somewhere inside Kelleher a gong began ringing insistently.

The stranger crouched and his hand slapped down. A gun in it came slanting upward. Kelleher's right hand crossed, his long fingers closing over the familiar gun butt. No thought now, only a conditioned response. Shadows of doubt wormed suddenly in the stranger's eyes. Two shots drummed out, filling the vast silence with rolling thunder.

It was close. The stranger's shot was a swift and deadly echo superimposed on the noise from Kelleher's gun. It was closer than it had ever been before. A bullet plowed into the planking at Kelleher's feet. Then the stranger was falling forward, his eyes dead but having died with a look of shocked reality in them.

Smoke curled upward and time moved again. Feet scraped the floor. Somebody coughed. Babe's pale face seemed suspended in a haze of black powdersmoke.

Kelleher dropped to one knee. "Anybody know this man?"

Nobody answered him. Kelleher thought it strange that a man as fast as this one should be unknown. The stranger's pockets were empty.

"They'll keep on trying," the plump saloon owner said. "Won't they ever learn?"

Kelleher found himself wondering what it would be like to be afraid, the way this stranger had been just before he died. And then Kelleher wondered again at the closeness of the showdown. He thought, It's never been like that before.

Somebody slapped him on the back. "You're a cool customer, Ben. You've got more guts than any man alive. This stranger didn't have a chance."

Kelleher smiled mechanically, the twist of his lips thin and bitter. Praise, but they didn't realize how close it had been. *The stranger didn't have a chance.* That should mean something.

The saloon owner gave the order to have the body cleared away. Another Boothill grave. It was an old story.

"I could have handled him," Babe said, touching Kelleher's sleeve. "You don't have to protect me, Ben. I'm a big girl now. He didn't have to die."

Kelleher shook his head. "You don't understand. He came here to kill or be killed. You were only an interlude."

"That's not very flattering."

"It was a pattern," he said doggedly. "You weren't really part of it."

She nodded suddenly. "A reputation can be a terrible thing."

Resentment stirred in him. Without replying he went back to the bar and lifted his untasted drink. The hum of voices curved around him. He was the fastest man alive with a gun. Men who tried to prove otherwise were doomed to failure. He wasn't human. He was the great Ben Kelleher.

The words hurt Kelleher deep inside. He wasn't like other men—he was above them. Loneliness ate into him.

A jumble of sounds came from far off. Kelleher heard the sounds and there was no immediate meaning. Then Tobe Shaler, a deputy marshal, ran inside the Steerhorn, carrying a sawed-off shotgun in the crook of his arm.

"They're a-comin'," he said. "Them cowboys from across the river. What'll we do, Ben?"

KELLEHER listened critically. Once again his mind was cold and sharp. He heard the rapid drumming of horses' hoofs, the raucous yells, the wild shots as guns were emptied into the sky.

"I'll handle it, Tobe."

Shaler looked relieved. Unhurriedly Kelleher finished his drink. He wiped his lips, then walked to the door. Nobody spoke to him. The batwings flapped emptily after his passage and he stood on the high boardwalk, alone and sure of himself now, waiting for the cowboys to come to him.

Yells and shots. A colored light winked out. Another. A bullet thudded into a fire barrel, and the water ran out in a thin stream.

They were closer now. At the head was a big redheaded youngster with a three-month's growth of beard on his face. Behind him were a score of cowboys, all shooting and yelling. Methodically, his hands empty, Kelleher stepped down into the dust.

The big redhead's horse was almost abreast of him now. He took another step and the horse shied away. Kelleher's right hand reached up to grab the bridle. Cursing, the redhead put spurs to the horse's flanks.

Pain stabbed through one of Kelleher's fingers. Grimly he hung on. He felt himself dragged forward but his grip remained firm, despite his twisted finger. By sheer weight and strength he brought the plunging horse to a halt. The redhead was almost unseated.

"What's the idea?" the redhead demanded, leveling his gun at Kelleher's head. "Leggo!"

Kelleher spoke calmly. "You boys want a good time and we aim to see that you have it. Take your pick—whiskey, cards, or lulu gals to dance with. If you want to hooraw the town, you'll all hit jail and you'll pay for your damage. Will it be worth it?"

The redhead laughed. "Who'll stop us?"

"I will."

"To hell with you!"

The other riders had swung on past. Now they turned and crowded close. For the moment their guns were silent. The loud laughter of the redhead began to taper off.

"You're Kelleher," he said suddenly.

"It's your choice, Red. Make it."

"We've heard about you, Kelleher. You've got a square rep up and down the trail." The redhead stood in his stirrups. "Well, what'll it be, boys?"

Kelleher listened critically, weighing the significance. At first their words were hot and angry, gradually becoming more and more sane. Then their tempers collapsed and Kelleher knew that he had won.

They rode on, but quietly now, their guns holstered and their voices light and gay. Kelleher stood there, not moving, watching them rack their horses and move into the saloons and dancehalls. Only then did Kelleher step up out of the street. With pride he knew that he had just proved something. A rep could also be a thing of good. . . .

Later that night, sometime after midnight, he stood at the bar in the Steerhorn and had a nightcap. The place was empty now, past closing time. A swamper was sweeping up behind him. The door of the office opened and Babe came toward him, the money of her roulette bank checked into the big safe. Without speaking they went out to the street together.

The town was quiet. There had been no trouble. The cowboys had ridden back across the river. A drunk staggered past them.

Kelleher felt relaxed. This was what he liked—the day finished and the darkness and Babe walking along at his side. A man could let his senses become dull and peaceful. It was ritual. Each night he walked Babe home to the boarding house where she lived.

"Everything's under control," she said softly. "I guess that will always be you, Ben. Always under control."

He listened to the hollow sound of their feet hitting the high boardwalk. There was a stirring inside him, a nameless thing, a feeling that always hit him when they were alone together like this. But he could find no words to explain it, not even to himself. Here was the peace that was so different from his daily life.

"You're so sure of everything," she told him.

He shook his head. "Not of everything, Babe. Not of you. Why won't you marry me?"

"You know why." Her chin tilted stubbornly. "I won't be married to a peace officer. You know what happened to my father."

"It won't happen to me."

"Those who live by the gun—" She broke off. "Ben you're getting old. Why not admit it? You're slowing down."

"No," he said.

"Let's not fight. Ben, there's one thing I've got to be sure of. What's the most important thing in the world to you?"

"You are," he said. "You, Babe."

She shook her head. "There's something in you that makes that a lie. It's not your job—I know that." She hesitated a brief moment. "Ben, what is it you're trying to prove?"

He felt helpless. They had been over this so many times. In his mind he saw the other times, the other places. For so long he had been a lawman, she a gambler. The ritual of seeing her daily, of walking her home had been enough. But now it no longer satisfied him. It was no longer enough.

She touched his arm. "Why don't you quit?"

"I don't know," he said, and his helplessness was in his voice. "I don't know."

IN THE darkness her eyes were upon him. He sensed the sympathy in her glance. A tension hit him—he didn't want sympathy. Then he sensed that she understood. Her hand slid down his arm and she took his hand. For a moment they walked that way, close and yet worlds apart. Her hand shifted, and her palm was warm and firm against his fingers.

He winced.

"Ben, what's wrong?" She pulled to a halt. "Your finger—it's swollen."

Roughly he freed his hand. "It's all right."

His stride quickened and she had to hurry to catch up. She said, "You'd better see Doc Raymer in the morning."

"I'm all right."

"Your pride, Ben. Your damnable pride!"

They were far apart now. Kelleher closed his mind to everything except the thing he felt without understanding. They walked in silence until they were in front of the Casino.

Kelleher paused. Inside the place the lights were blazing. A small crowd was still gathered there. And it was wrong—the place should be closed for the night. Kelleher said, "Wait," and then left Babe standing there and pushed inside.

Big Jake Bardon and Tim Rourke were fighting. A few men and some of the girls were gathered in a circle around them. The girl called Jeannie had her hand pressed against her mouth. The crowd watched sullenly.

Tim Rourke's face was badly marked. A slim, sandy-haired youngster, he wore patched but neat range garb. Big Jake Bardon outweighed him by forty pounds. There was a mean streak in the bigger man. Systematically he was cutting the lighter man to ribbons.

"It's okay, Ben," a man said to Kelleher. "Rourke started it again."

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Neither man was armed. Kelleher stood there helplessly, like all the rest, sickened by the sight but unable to interfere. By the code the fight was fair enough.

A blow from Big Jake Bardon's fist sent Tim Rourke sprawling on his back.

For a moment Tim Rourke lay there, panting and stunned, shaking his blond head. Then he grinned up through cut and bleeding lips. Slowly he pushed himself to his feet again. He waded in and without trouble Jake Bardon fended him off. Jake Bardon was laughing.

"Damn you, finish it off!" somebody said.

Big Jake stopped laughing. His big fist smashed out and hit Tim Rourke on the jaw. The youngster collapsed and lay still.

"Enough?" Jake Bardon asked.

"Don't be a fool," Kelleher said. 'Can't you see he's out cold?"

The crowd knelt around the unconscious youngster. Jeannie broke through with water and a clean cloth. Kneeling there, she began to bathe his forehead.

"Every time Jake tries to throw him out, the youngster picks a fight," a man said to Kelleher. "He never has a chance. I reckon he knows it, but he'll try again next time."

"Why does he keep on?" Kelleher asked.

The man didn't answer. Tim Rourke stirred and then sat up. He glanced up at Big Jake Bardon and his battered lips split into a grin. Painfully he climbed to his feet. Willing hands tried to help him but he shook them off. He whispered something to Jeannie and then staggered out. The men in the crowd followed him outside. It was easy to see that their sympathies were with him.

A loser, Kelleher thought, and the crowd accepts him. But they don't accept me.

Thoughtfully he went outside. Babe was gone. Troubled, Kelleher made his way toward the hotel.

* * *

Time is like a river. It had always been that way to Ben Kelleher, flowing endlessly onward, following an aimless course. There should be a meaning to life but he had never found it.

He sat at his desk now, brooding. A week had gone past. Each night he had walked Babe home, but they had not talked again about what was between them or what was in their hearts.

She was wrong, he thought, trying to convince himself. I'm not getting old.

But deep inside himself he knew that she was right. The fine edge was gone from his split-second timing. The showdown with the unknown stranger had really proved it.

He lifted his hand and looked at it. One of the fingers was puffed and crooked. The break bothered him, but he hadn't gone to see the doctor. And he wasn't quite sure why. Somehow, by not seeing the doctor, he was proving something to himself. It kept a worry below the threshold of his conscious mind which he didn't want brought into the open.

A note was lying on the desk in front of him, and he picked it up. It had come in the mail today, addressed to him. The note said in part:

. . . Since Bud Camfer never got back home, I figure you must have got him. He had big ideas but he was no great shucks as a gun hand. Now I'm riding up to get you, Kelleher. Your rep don't scare me—and I've got quite a rep myself. I reckon maybe you've heard of me already. . . .

The note was signed The Pecos Kid.

Folding the note, Kelleher put it into his pocket. He stood up, pride stamped across his face. But dark shadows flowed back of his eyes. His measured tread carried him toward the Steerhorn for a drink.

A CROWD was gathered in front of the Casino. Kelleher stopped and saw that the crowd was reading something tacked to the wall. In silence they made way for him. The note fastened there was similar to the one he carried in his pocket.

Deep anger touched Kelleher's mind. He started to tear down the note and then thought better of it. He turned away.

"He ain't got a chance," a man said with awe. "Nobody can outdraw you, Ben. Hell, won't they ever give up trying?"

Kelleher stared at the man. There was

a coldness in him. He flexed his fingers and felt the pain of the break. Then he strode on, pushing through the Steerborn's batwings.

His eyes looked back at him from the mirror behind the bar. And he thought suddenly, I haven't got a chance.

The thought amazed him. It was the first time he had ever doubted himself. And then the thing that had oppressed him for so long became very clear.

They said he had guts, that he wasn't afraid of anything. He had always told himself it was true. But how did he know? No man he had ever gone up against before in a shoot-out had ever had a chance. Now it was different. The odds would be against him.

Babe found him there. She came in hurriedly, wearing her reserve like a cloak. She had her pride too.

"Ben, I just heard," she told him. "What will you do?"

He lifted a shoulder. "I have no choice."

"You can't face him," she cried breathlessly. "Your broken finger—you won't have a chance!"

"No one knows about that finger but you. And I've got two hands, Babe."

"But you've always been slower with your left." Her voice hammered out at him. "Give in, Ben! Nobody will blame you. Quit your job. You were really cut out to be a rancher. You don't have to shoot it out with this man—"

"I'll meet him," Kelleher said gently. "All along I've had pride in my courage. But what do I really know about being brave? I've never had a chance to prove it to myself because I've been the best. Now that isn't true...." He shrugged. "Take Tim Rourke. I've learned something now. He has real courage."

"Ben...."

He shook his head. "I've got to go through with this thing."

She stared at him and then nodded slowly. "I understand...Ben, after it's over?"

"You know," he said. "I think you know."

Kelleher stood there long after she departed. He thought about how it would be. He looked down at his hands and they were shaking.

I'm afraid already, he thought dully. It hasn't happened yet and I'm scared.

He carried the thought with him wherever he went. A day passed and then another. The Pecos Kid should be here soon. I'm afraid. It seemed strange that none of the people of the town could see the guilt lying in his face.

They said that The Pecos Kid didn't have a chance. Wasn't Ben Kelleher supreme? But they didn't know. And Kelleher couldn't tell them.

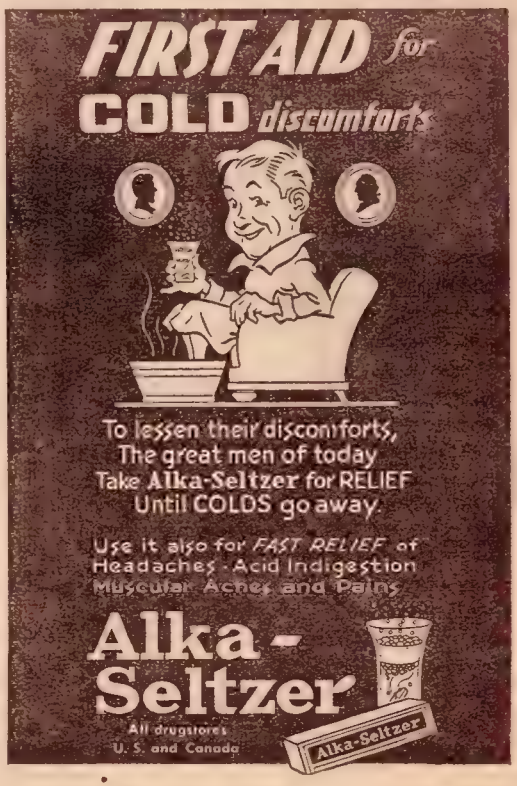
Kelleher wondered how he would react when the Pecos Kid arrived. Would fear crawl in his face? Would he try to find some hole in which to hide?

I don't know, he told himself over and over. How can I know till it happens.

A man brought the news to him. He was sitting at his desk when the man burst inside. Kelleher knew what the news was going to be even before the man told him.

"He's here," the man babbled. "The Pecos Kid!"

KELLEHER stood up slowly. His face was blank. Somehow his legs supported him, a thing which surprised



him at that moment. He looked down at his hands and they were shaking. That was fear.

Then he was walking out into the hot sunlight. He tried to push all conscious thought from his mind, the way he always did when he was about to face a showdown. It had always seemed best that way.

His eyes quickly became accustomed to the sunlight. The street was clear, but he was aware of the faces peering out from behind the windows. Down at the far end of the street a man stood motionless, his horse tied to the first cottonwood. Kelleher knew that his own hands were still shaking uncontrollably. He was afraid. Soon everybody in the town would know it.

Then Kelleher stepped down into the dust. Strangely, his legs began carrying him forward.

An odd sense of timelessness touched him. The Pecos Kid was walking slowly toward him; he was walking toward the Pecos Kid. It was like a crazy dream. Someday they would meet, yet time had nothing to do with it. It was all very strange. . . .

Now they were close. The Pecos Kid halted. There was a sneer on his thin lips, a look of complete assurance in his eyes. He was wearing his guns low—a killer. He stood spread-legged in the dust, waiting for Marshal Kelleher to come to him.

And Kelleher's legs kept pushing him forward. He didn't know how. The Pecos Kid went into a crouch. They were close now, close enough, and Kelleher halted abruptly.

I'm afraid, he thought. He began wondering why some of the things he had pictured in his mind didn't happen to him. In seconds now the proof of his cowardice would be there. Then his hands stopped shaking and he was calm.

A great light burst inside him. *Fear has nothing to do with courage. It's only when you quit that you're a coward.*

"How do you want it?" The Pecos Kid asked.

"You name it."

The Pecos Kid grinned flatly. "Now!" Kelleher's left hand crossed, his useless right hand down at his side. He knew he was terribly slow. The Pecos Kid's gun came up in a lightning-swift arc. It was thundering even before Kelleher drew his own gun from leather.

The bullet hammered into Kelleher's right shoulder, and the impact threw him off balance. The Pecos Kid's next shot missed. Now Kelleher's gun was coming up. The shock of the bullet was in him, but that was all. A thought leaped into his mind. I'm not afraid! By God, I'm not afraid!

Another bullet struck him in the side. He swayed there in the dust of the street. Carefully he lifted his own weapon. He heard The Pecos Kid cry out, "Fall, damn you, fall!" Kelleher leveled his gun. With a strange calmness he knew he couldn't miss. His finger tightened slowly on the trigger.

The Pecos Kid was hit. Kelleher knew it. The Pecos Kid went up on his toes, then his gun slid out of his lax fingers. Slowly he began to fold over, collapsing into the dust.

For a brief moment Kelleher stared down at him. Kelleher's eyes were no longer shadowed—the truth was in him now. Then the world spun and he felt himself falling.

Babe was one of the first to reach his side. Then they were all gathered around him. Somebody said that Doc Raymer was on his way. Kelleher lay on the ground and stared up at the faces above him. None of them was either friendly or unfriendly.

"I didn't quit," he said clearly. "I didn't quit." He could see the shifting pattern on all the faces. There was a momentary blankness and then something came alive in them. A dozen men were suddenly kneeling beside him.

"I'll be damned," somebody said. "I reckon you're human after all."

The pain hammered at him, but he felt wonderful.

"Tell them that you're going to be a rancher," Babe said.

"I'll tell 'em," Kelleher said to her. "I've found out something I've always had to know. Now I think everything's all right."

BOOTHILL for OLD VIRGINIA

WHEN cold sober, which was seldom, the man from Virginia would tell the folks around the Comstock Lode region that his name was James Finney. When somewhat sober he claimed he was Jim Fennimore. But when drunk, which was his usual condition, he gave full rein to his imagination and would choose such fancy names as Marmaduke Entwhistlestop or Ransome Rableigh.

To save themselves time and trouble, the people just called him "Old Virginia." On the night that he stumbled and fell on the main street of the new little mining camp, breaking his bottle on the ground, it was by the merest chance that he mumbled, "I christen this town Virginia City."

Although Old Virginia's social life left him little time for actual mining, he did manage to stagger around the countryside and stake numerous claims here and there, at random. As this was very early in the Comstock Lode discovery days, many of his claims proved to be of great value. However, he never refused to sell a claim to the first bidder who came along, the price fluctuating according to his alcoholic content at the moment.

When the Ophir Mining Company located a large vein lying to the westward of the Comstock, Old Virginia told some of his friends that he had staked a claim on the section in 1858. These "friends" immediately pooled a small sum of money and bought the claim, knowing they could sue the Ophir Company for a sizeable sum. Old Virginia demanded the cash on the line, promising to take the purchasers out to the area the next morning to get the original notice which he had placed on the outcroppings. For the following four days, Old Virginia was too drunk to remember even having sold the claim. In desperation, on the evening of the fifth day, the "friends" kidnaped Old Virginia, locked him in a shack, and left him alone for two days.

When they returned, their prisoner was sober, but very mad. But when they explained what it was all about, Old Virginia led them out to the location and, without hesitation, went directly to a large tower of outcroppings. Drawing out a small block of rock, he reached in and drew forth the much-wanted original notice.

By this time all of Old Virginia's money was spent. The new owners of the claim were so happy that they gave him an extra few dollars, plus a good horse stabled in neighboring Dayton.

Old Virginia, who loved horses, though knowing nothing about them, took the stage over to Dayton without even stopping to get a drink.

On presenting the note of ownership, the livery stable owner turned the horse over to Old Virginia.

A hostler led the horse out into the street, after putting on the saddle. "This is kind of a spry hoss," said the hostler, giving Old Virginia a boost to the animal's back. "You sure you can handle him?"

Old Virginia looked down in scorn. "I ain't never seen th' hoss I couldn't ride," he said, giving a quick pull on the reins.

The excited horse reared back, then plunged forward. Old Virginia was catapulted over the horse's head. He hit the ground so hard that his neck was broken. He died instantly.

All of Virginia City turned out to give the man who had named the town a fine and fitting funeral. At the graveside, many of his old cronies remembered words that Old Virginia had often spoken: "You gotta be awful careful when you're sober—'cause awful things can happen to a sober man."

By John T. Lynch.

PISTOL PRODIGAL'S

A Novelette

By

MARVIN DE VRIES

The innocent Osage Kid might rid himself forever of his handcuffs, if he could beat a six-bullet straight—with a pair of blank cartridges!

CHAPTER ONE

Trouble's Right Bower

RHETT WINSLOW, who drove stage from Jamaica Junction to Buck's Mill for Corbin, Weber & Co., was always anxious to make a good impression at Pardee's. He had several

He kept his hand on the man's arm and forced it back

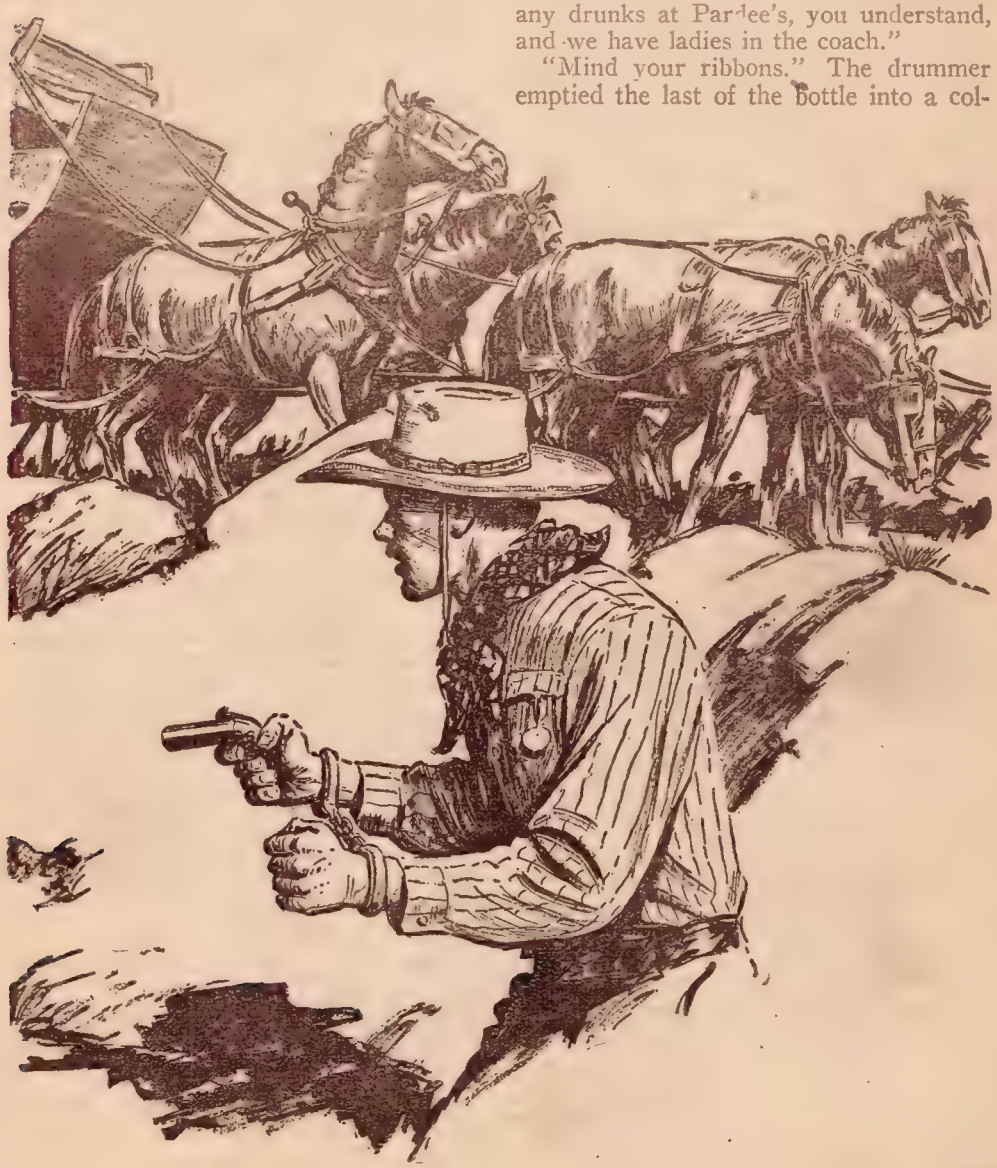
reasons. One was Gwen Pardee. Perhaps Gwen was the main reason, but the Pardee ranch was a convenient place to stop, and Mrs. Pardee served good meals. She enjoyed the break in the day's monotony, and with her own special magic always gave a stageful of cranky passengers new comfort and cheer for the rest of the trip to Buck's Mill.

But the Pardees didn't need the business, and offensive conduct by a passenger might easily persuade them to discontinue the accommodation. Thus Rhett took it on himself to persuade the whiskey drummer who sat beside him to stop his tippling. "Save your appetite, friend," he urged. "We're getting to Pardee's."

"Mind your own business," the drummer muttered.

"I am," Rhett told him. "I don't want any drunks at Pardee's, you understand, and we have ladies in the coach."

"Mind your ribbons." The drummer emptied the last of the bottle into a col-



lapsible metal cup and threw the bottle overboard. Then he lifted the cup to his mouth.

Before he got it half way Winslow tapped the bottom with the whip's butt, and the whiskey poured out.

Sudden fury blazed in the drummer's eyes. He wore a sneak gun, and made a flash draw that would have done credit to a tophand gunman.

If you're a drummer, Rhett thought, I'm a black-eyed susan.

The drummer's weapon jabbed into his ribs, and Rhett saw himself going overboard like a piece of limp baggage with a bullet in his brisket. But suddenly the pressure eased, and the storm in the drummer's eyes let up. He turned white. The muscles along his jaws twitched. He pulled back his hand, and it looked as though it took all his strength. He dropped the gun back into the shoulder holster and brushed his hand across his face. "Sorry!" he muttered. "Sorry I lost my head. I don't want to give you trouble. Reckon I take offense too quick."

"And probably," Rhett admitted, "I give it too quick. The trouble is, I run into a lot of odd characters an' get too much of a notion I'm boss around here."

"How far to Pardee's?" the drummer asked.

"It's over the rise."

"If they're so damned fussy, what'll they think of this jailbird you got inside?"

"I've been wondering," Rhett admitted. He'd been wondering since the deputy sheriff and his shackled prisoner had gotten aboard at Jamaica Junction. The prisoner called himself the Osage Kid, but Rhett knew better.

In the Pardee parlor was a small picture of this same boy taken a long time ago; the picture of a youngster in knee-britches and string-waist, his lips smiling, his eyes filled with the glow of living. His name was Lance Pardee, whatever new one he might have gotten in the San Antonio deadfalls since he ran off with a lot of wild notions in his head, and, finally, traded a smoking gun for a lawman's shackles.

Pardee's was only a thirty-minute stop, but Rhett usually stretched it out to an hour and made it up later, because it took time to raise a shine in Gwen Pardee's eyes and to make sure he had remembered the bright color of her hair a-right; it took such time as he had a mind to use to touch his lips to hers and get the feel of her full body against his to carry away with him. But this time he'd rather have skipped it, because he knew he was fetching them trouble, such trouble and grief as no one should be called upon to bear.

"He ain't a bad lookin' youngster," the drummer said, "but he sure smoked up San Antone."

"How bad?" Winslow asked.

"He croaked Mike the Ike. You ever heard of Mike the Ike?"

"No."

"He was a customer of mine. He had a nice place in Core's Alley. Made a fortune. The kid was after a piece of that."

"Did he get it?"

"He sure did. He played a lone hand an' grabbed everything in sight."

"I can't understand why they're draggin' him up this way."

"Well, there was a lot of lynch talk, and the sheriff snaked him outa there for safekeeping. The sheriff figured he musta had a partner an' wanted to keep him alive till he got a little time to think it over. He figured a kid like that would spill his guts easy. Anyhow, that's how I heard it."

THEY were half way up the long slant now. The sun dipped below the tawny crest, throwing them in shadow. Talk died away, and Rhett nibbled at a puzzle in his mind. The drummer still fumed a little. The sudden flurry between them wasn't settled and it might easily flare again. The salesman still had a bone to pick, and the only reason he held back was because he had something else in his teeth.

He goes inside when we leave Pardee's, Rhett told himself. I don't want him climbin' down my throat when I'm busy drivin'.

"Driver," a woman called from inside, "stop the coach!"

"What's wrong, lady?" Rhett inquired.

"This officer isn't a gentleman," she called back. "I want him evicted."

"Keep goin'," the deputy sheriff growled. "She's drivin' me nuts, that's all."

"Stop right here," the woman insisted.

"I'm on the slant," Rhett objected.

"We'll be up to the top in a minute."

"He insulted little Miss what's-her-name," the woman went on. "Stop this thing."

"I'm sure he'll apologize if he did," Rhett assured her, and kept going.

"That old battle-ax!" the drummer muttered. "She's been tryin' to run that shebang in there ever since we started. That's what drove me out on top. Who is the old buzzard anyway?"

"Calls herself Mrs. Colonel Albee. She's going somewhere to join her husband at an army post."

"Tough on the army," the drummer muttered. "Worse than Injuns. Little Miss what's-her-name seems nice, though."

Rhett Winslow nodded sourly. "Seems so," he agreed, although he knew her for a notorious character named Prim Annie, who traveled Texas by stage and made life interesting and, sometimes, miserable for drummers and the like. She was a pretty girl, gentle-looking and shy, but could pick a man's pockets at ten feet, and look as innocent as a child. Waiting room and depot dodgers gave the traveling public due warning of her activities.

When Winslow topped the rise and pulled up to give the horses a breather, he handed the lines to the drummer and got down. Deputy and prisoner faced the rear of the coach. The two women sat opposite them.

Mrs. Albee was a tall woman in outlandish clothes and a heavy veil to keep out the dust. She carried a sun umbrella, one end planted firmly on the coach floor, her hands cupped around the big door knob handle at the other end.

Prim Annie sat beside her, like a doll in an oversize baby cab. She could easily have been mistaken for a girl who was much too young to be traveling alone, but the deputy claimed she had a gun and had tried to slip it to his prisoner.

"When I caught on she slid it down her front and it's there now," the deputy insisted.

"That's a lie," Mrs. Albee flared. "You haven't a gun, have you, dear?"

"Oh, dear, no," Annie breathed.

"She better turn it over to me or I'll take it offn her right here an' now," the deputy went on. He had a badgered worn-out look, and he meant what he said.

"How dare you?" Mrs. Albee stormed. "Don't be afraid, dear."

"I—I'm not, not really," Annie whispered, shrinking into the corner. She had pretty brown eyes and graceful movements. Her hands fluttered over her lap. The Osage Kid watched her with a flame in his eyes.

Winslow said easily, "We'll get to Pardee's in a minute and you can all stretch your legs and—"

"I don't want to stretch my legs," Mrs. Albee stated. "I want an apology from this old goat."

"Pardee's?" the Osage Kid exploded.

"Yeah," Rhett said. "We've been stopping there lately for meals." He gave Lance Pardee a steady look and finally added, "You know the place?"

PARDEE let his eyes drop. His hands shook suddenly, and the chain in his lap made a grating sound. "No," he said, looking up at last, "I can't say I do."

"If it bothers you one way or another, you can stay in the coach, I reckon."

"The hell he can," the deputy snapped. "I want a meal."

"Why would it bother me?" The kid tried to bluster.

"I wouldn't know," Rhett said slowly.

The Osage Kid looked trapped, trapped by what Rhett had told him. He hadn't known until now what he was in for, but Rhett was glad he'd warned him. It would give him time to bolster his courage and bring off a meeting like that with what grace he could muster.

"As far as I'm concerned," the deputy announced, "these ladies better behave themselves or they can stay at Pardee's. I don't want them butting into my business anymore. That's final, an' I want that gun."

"If my husband were here he'd have you horse-whipped for insulting a lady," Mrs. Albee stated.

"She ain't no lady," the deputy muttered.

"Apologize this instant, you common lout!"

"Now wait a minute," Rhett broke in. "I'll put the drummer down here and you can come up with me, Annie."

At the mention of her name, Prim

Annie caught her breath. Her eyes shifted to the deputy and the woman beside her, but in all the excitement neither seemed to have noticed Rhett's blunder. "I'd be glad to," she agreed.

"No, sit down," Mrs. Albee insisted. "I want an—"

"You won't get it," the deputy snarled. "You mind your own business. You've been badgering me since we left Jamaica Junction, and I'm fed up with it. I'm the law here an' if you don't shut up, you can get out an' walk. That's final, an'—"

He got that far with his tirade, and then Mrs. Colonel Albee slid her hand down the umbrella stick and clipped him over the head with the heavy end piece. The deputy pitched forward like a shot horse, and Prim Annie came alive. She reached down her front for the small derringer she had concealed there and tossed it to the Osage Kid, who leaped clear of the coach and ran.

RHETT stood frozen in his tracks. Then he raced around the coach and took after the kid on a dead run. Pest as she was, Rhett couldn't let Mrs. Albee get into trouble on account of the Osage Kid, trouble that would hit all the Pardees like fire. The deputy had been badgered out of his patience, and the whole United States Army wasn't likely to intimidate him now. The only way to save the situation was to grab the Osage Kid and get him back before the deputy came to.

The drummer came down to the ground and fired, but the Osage Kid kept going. For an instant, Rhett thought the shot had been meant for him, and it suddenly hit him that the drummer and Prim Annie might be in this together, trying to get Pardee away from the law.

The drummer fired again and Rhett plainly saw it was at Pardee.

The drummer kept coming. The Osage Kid, hampered by the handcuffs, couldn't outrun him. Suddenly he stopped, his face twisted with fury. He opened on the drummer with the derringer. The salesman slowed and took careful aim. For an instant it looked like the Osage Kid wouldn't be obliged to face his kin over the hill. Then Rhett jumped the drummer from behind and ripped the gun out of his hand.

The drummer looked fat and clumsy, but he fought with wild fury, and before Rhett could shed his own gun the drummer grabbed it and struck him a blow that stunned him. But he kept his hold on the man's arm and forced it back, holding it there till his head cleared. Then he grabbed the barrel, twisted it out of the drummer's grip and threw it out of reach.

Lance Pardee came back, step by slow step, but Rhett didn't see him. The drummer kicked, gouged and clawed. He kneed Rhett. His stomach knotted up, and a swirling black cloud engulfed him. But his foe, somehow, was on the ground. He toppled to one side and lay there gasping, gulping in air till his stomach eased up again, and the cloud lifted. The drummer raised his head, and Rhett gave him a left-handed poke that flattened him out on the ground for good.

Then he saw Lance coming in at them from the side. He had scooped up one of the guns off the ground and was leveling it at the drummer's head. Rhett lunged and knocked the weapon to one side. The gun roared and kicked up a puff of sand near the drummer's head.

"What's the idea?" Rhett exploded. "What're you tryin' to do, get hung for sure? Give me that gun."

The Osage Kid let it go. It was Rhett's own gun. He found the drummer's weapon and slid that in his belt, too.

"While I'm at it, I might as well have that derringer, too," he demanded.

The Osage Kid shrugged. "I'm in no shape to match a fight, I reckon," he remarked, rattling his chains. "It's in my hip pocket. The thing's no damned good anyhow."

"I don't understand what's going on here," Rhett muttered.

"That's no wonder," the Osage Kid muttered. "Maybe I don't understand either."

"You know this drummer?"

The kid's eyes slanted down. "No," he said, but Rhett knew he lied.

"What about Prim—that girl in the coach?"

"I know her, of course."

"Known her long?"

"Yes." His head went down again. "She's my girl."

Rhett muttered an oath. "You know what she is?"

"I know what she is. Nobody else does."

"Why didn't you keep oh runnin'?"

"I thought I'd better not. I'd get that old lady in an awful fix."

"That's real thoughtful."

"That's why I stopped."

Rhett gave him a long careful look. "I reckon you did at that," he conceded finally. "Let's go back."

The drummer suddenly stirred and sat up, a dazed look on his face.

"You coming or you going to stay here?" Rhett asked him.

The drummer pushed up and got his feet under him. "I was sidin' the law," he muttered, staggering along. "That's more'n you cin say."

"Oh, shut up!" Rhett snapped, uneasily aware it was the truth. "You can have your gun if you think you can handle it."

The drummer took it silently and shoved it back into the shoulder holster. They reached the coach. The deputy sheriff still lay slumped back in the seat, but he was beginning to show signs of life and Pardee got inside before he opened his eyes.

"You, too," Rhett told the drummer. "I don't want you up there with me."

Stiff and sore, Rhett climbed to the driver's seat. Pardee's lay down there in a bowl of brown grass, like cluttered wreckage after a gale, the westering sun touching it here and there and twisting it all awry with its yellow flame and fury. To this place then he must bring his load of sorrow and shame.

He started down. As an after-thought, he took a look at the no-good derringer Prim Annie had given to the Osage Kid. It still held two unused cartridges—both blanks.

CHAPTER TWO

Escape

IN SPITE of the slanting sun putting it to the torch, the Pardee place was neat and attractive, and stood serenely under the browning trees. Rhett tried to get to the house first to give them warning, but it didn't work. Mrs. Pardee was watching from the window, and, by the look on her face, already knew all he had to say. "Thirty minutes," Rhett called, and watched the passengers file to the house.

The drummer and Annie walked together, trailing the others, the man doing the most talking, making exasperated gestures. Just before they went inside, Rhett saw him strike her across the face with the flat of his hand. Winslow frowned and threw the lines to old Abe Runch, who helped here with the staging.

King Pardee waved briefly from the barn door, then stepped back inside. Rhett climbed slowly down, favoring his aches and pains, and washed his face and hands in the tank under the windmill. Then he followed the passengers to the house.

Gwen was in the kitchen, her head tipped against the wall, her hand pressed to her mouth. She turned when Rhett entered and reached out her hand. She could scarcely speak and her face was white. "What is it, Rhett? What's he doing here like that? What happened, Rhett?"

"I don't know exactly, Gwen. Where's your mother?"

"PIN-WORMS may be A FAMILY AFFAIR"

Fidgeting, nose-picking and a tormenting rectal itch are often telltale signs of Pin-Worms . . . ugly parasites that medical experts say infest *one out of every three* persons examined. Entire families may be victims and not know it.

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She nodded toward the dining room. "He warned us not to let on who he was when he came in. I had to get out of there. Tell me what's wrong."

Rhett put his hands on her shoulders. "He had trouble in San Antonio. He calls himself the Osage Kid. I'll find out what it's all about. I haven't had a chance to talk to the deputy."

"Why did they take him up here?"

"I understand he killed somebody, Gwen, somebody by the name of Mike the Ike. There was a lot of lynch talk and they pulled him out for safe-keeping."

She huddled against him. He held her close and cupped his hand over her hair. "We've got to do something," she whispered.

"We'll do what we can." He almost choked on the words, so deeply stirred to be taken, as a matter of course, into such kinship.

"Go in and eat," she said suddenly. "I'll tell papa."

Rhett watched her a moment through the window, his frown lifting briefly. Then he turned and entered the dining room, speaking a soft word to Mrs. Pardee as he went past. She stood against the wall, her eyes fixed on Lance Pardee and his handcuffs. Her face was white, her eyes dismayed.

RHETT became lost in thought. This place and these people claimed his loyalty, and he would have it no other way. Once touched by all he saw and felt under this roof, a man could never again turn his back and leave it behind. But Lance Pardee had. Out of this soil and these ways, the gentle ways of the heart, the Osage Kid had got his growth and taken his course. And, too soon to forget, had turned traitor to it all.

Rhett shook his head. That isn't it, he told himself. More likely, what he had here betrayed him. He remembered the sudden light in the Kid's eyes when he looked at the girl in the coach, a look that honored any woman with its unquenchable loyalty and trust. It was a bright and shining thing, stemming from this place as much as the boy's life itself, and it had brought him only shame and disgrace. But Rhett suddenly gave it his respect.

The deputy had a cut lip, and it bothered him to eat. An egg-sized welt, still growing, showed on the side of his head where Mrs. Albee had hit him. He wouldn't speak to anyone. Prim Annie sat next to the drummer, the marks of his hand flaming on her cheek. Mrs. Albee still rattled on, but none of the others helped the conversation.

The Osage Kid kept his eyes on his plate, and never once let them roam around the old familiar walls. Because of the handcuffs, he was having trouble getting food to his mouth. At last his mother came up behind him and said in a steady gentle voice that she would be glad to help if the officer didn't mind.

"I do mind!" the deputy snapped. "Stand away!"

The Osage Kid gave her a brief wild glance, then let his eyes drop to the plate again.

"Law officers are natural-born rogues," Mrs. Albee observed. "Don't you think so, Mrs. Pardee?"

"I have no opinion," Mrs. Pardee answered, retreating to the wall.

Lance Pardee accidentally poured hot coffee down his shirt front. It made him jump, and what was left in the cup went over the deputy. With a muttered oath, he jabbed his prisoner with his elbow, spilling him off his chair. Dishes clattered, and the kid lay there pounding his fists against the floor. Mrs. Pardee bent down and spoke softly as she slowly helped him up.

It grew dark and she brought lamps, setting them in brackets along the wall. Rhett looked at his watch and saw the time was gone. King Pardee entered, and Rhett saw he knew the truth. He had a lantern in his hand. His eyes were bleak and bitter, but he kept them away from the table where his son, Lance, sat. "Abe wants you outside, Rhett," he announced. "I'm afraid there'll be some delay. You ran a nut off the axle. I'm surprised you didn't lose a wheel."

Rhett started to say something, thought better of it and shoved back from the table.

"Take the lantern," Pardee told him. "It's dark."

"I don't like stuffed animals on the walls," Mrs. Albee remarked. She had finished her meal and started looking

around the room. "Delicious," she went on, sucking the remnants out of her teeth, "Perfectly delicious, Mrs. Pardee."

"Won't you all come into the sitting room?" Mrs. Pardee invited.

"You're very kind," Mrs. Albee said.

Mrs. Pardee lit the lamp on the sitting room table. Softened by a large yellow globe decorated with small wild roses, it gave off a pleasant creamy light. Mrs. Albee made a complimentary remark, and Mrs. Pardee said she did the painting herself. "There are so many wild roses around, and I like them in the winter, too. Won't you sit down?"

"No, thank you. I always take a constitutional after I eat," the other woman explained, and, umbrella in hand, started in a circle around the room.

The drummer sagged into a rawhide chair near the window and watched the lantern moving around the yard. Prim Annie twisted a cheap little ring on her finger and watched Mrs. Albee making the rounds. The deputy and the Osage Kid sat on a sofa near the stone fireplace, and the deputy, surprisingly, rolled his prisoner a cigarette and lit it for him. "I been damn' ornery," he remarked by way of making amends. "I can't stand a woman like that."

King Pardee hadn't come into the room, and Gwen had, apparently, stayed in the barn. Mrs. Pardee sat in the darkest corner and, deaf to the silence that engulfed the room, feasted her eyes on Lance.

"I don't like stuffed animels, I must say," Mrs. Albee repeated.

"Nobody asked you to," the deputy muttered.

MRS. ALBEE found a small hand-carved wooden picture frame and said she liked the feel of nice wood. When at last she noticed the picture itself she asked, "Are these your children?"

Mrs. Pardee nodded, and it was all the answer she could make. It was an old picture. The boy was holding his sister by the arm with both hands, forcibly keeping her in place against the ordeal of facing the camera. There was a small exasperated look on his face, as if he knew this thing was going to be spoiled by her fretting. It brought a smile to Mrs. Albee's face, a gentle smile, and then a sudden startled look. "Why, this is you," she said, turning to the Osage Kid.

Mrs. Pardee leaned back so shadows covered her face. Lance glared, then put his elbows on his knees and let his face sag in his hands. The drummer's breath made a quick uneven sound, and Prim Annie was white.

"No," she breathed.

The drummer gave her a slanting look and sat up a little straighter.

"Madam Albee," the deputy stated as if a profound conviction had suddenly hit him, "it's like I thought. You haven't one damned grain of sense."

"Shocking," Mrs. Albee went on, starting off on another prowl, "perfectly shocking." She stopped beside Prim Annie and put her wrinkled hand on the girl's shoulder. "You poor child," she murmured, "didn't you know this?"

Prim Annie shook her head. "Of course I didn't know." She wouldn't look up.

"This pretty girl and your son are in love, Mrs. Pardee," the woman went on. "I noticed it on the coach. She tried to help him escape. She's a lovely girl."

Annie made an angry impatient gesture and got to her feet. Blindly, she stumbled out of the room. In the dining room she floundered into the big table and tipped the water pitcher. The big carving knife on the edge of the meat platter slid to the floor, point-first, and stood there quivering. Prim Annie mumbled some broken words and stooped to pick it up. Then she rushed outside.

Mrs. Albee, seeing all this, said, "You see how stirred she is. She's in love. You're lucky, my boy."

"Quit your talking," the Osage Kid groaned. "God, mom, I didn't know we were coming this way."

Mrs. Pardee came toward him and put her hand on his black hair. "Lance," she breathed. "Lance, my boy. Don't mind. I know you didn't do anything wrong."

"I didn't."

MRS. PARDEE stooped and kissed the back of his neck. King Pardee cat-footed into the room.

"How much longer before they'll be ready out there?" the deputy asked.

King Pardee shrugged. "They're getting after it. It shouldn't be long." He

moved around to the side of the sofa where Lance and the deputy sat, and there he stopped. "Nora, come here and help," he told his wife, raising his voice a little.

The deputy glanced up, into the muzzle of King Pardee's cocked gun. Instinctively, he lurched sideways, but Pardee's sharp warning brought him to his senses, and his hands moved away from his sides. "Here we go again," he muttered.

"Take his gun, Nora," Pardee said.

She accepted his authority in this and didn't hesitate. The deputy said, "There're things here you don't understand."

"I understand nothing, but I know what I must do. Don't argue."

The drummer got to his feet and started to move. Pardee eyed him a moment, then brought him to a halt and motioned him back to his chair. "Keep out of it," he ordered.

"I thought I'd go outside," the drummer muttered. "No harm in that."

"Stay where you are. Now find the key to the handcuffs, Nora."

"In my vest pocket," the deputy said.

Mrs. Pardee's hands shook, but she got the handcuffs open.

"There's a saddled horse waiting for you in the barn, Lance," Pardee went on. "Get out of the country if you can."

Lance moved across the room. The deputy had a final word. "Don't do it, kid. You're an outlaw for life the minute you climb that horse."

"Go on, Lance."

Lance took a final look around the room. Then he went out.

CHAPTER THREE

Death's Hole Card

PRIM ANNIE, bolting out of the house a short time ahead of the Osage Kid, had no clear idea of what she was going to do. The carving knife that had slid to the floor when she stumbled into the dining-room table was still in her hand. It had a long thin blade that caught the stray light from lanterns and windows and shredded it into sharp little shards. Desperate notions whipped at her. What she had seen and heard in the Pardee living room had brought her near the end of a rope that was rotting and raveling out in her hands. Rhett Winslow stood alone near the stagecoach, and she went that way.

"Is that you, Gwen?" he called.

"No."

"Oh." His voice was irritable. "It'll still be some time before we pull out. Abe's at the blacksmith shop trying to cut a new thread in that nut."

She came closer and said abruptly, "They all know now who he is. That woman blurted it out."

Rhett pursed his lips. "I s'pose it put the deputy into another stew."

"I didn't notice."

"I didn't see much sense in trying to keep it quiet, anyway. It looks to me like we've got enough folks around here trying to be something they aren't."

"Me, for instance?"

"That's not a bad guess."

"What about the drummer?"

"S'pose you tell me. You seem to be on whacking terms with him."

Her shoulders lifted ruefully but she didn't show her anger. "S'pose I did? What would you do about it?"

"The trouble is I don't know what's going on here. There's too much criss-crossing for me to keep up. But I do know that kid's sound, and I'll go to bat for him. Whatever he did, he did for you, and you know it as well as I."

"She's a pretty girl," Prim Annie said shrewdly.

For a second, Rhett didn't catch the drift. Then he smiled in spite of himself. "If that's the reason I'm in this, that's all right, too. I'll stand by it." He added

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roughly, "That's more than I can say for you."

"I tried to get him off," she defended. "I got him a gun."

Rhett reached in his pocket. "This one loaded with blanks?"

Her hand suddenly went to her mouth, and her eyes widened with shock. "That isn't true."

"There they are."

She stared silently at the harmless cartridges. "I suppose I should have known," she murmured at last. "I'm a fool. I didn't know."

"What the hell could he do with a gun anyway, except to get himself into worse trouble," Rhett continued, letting his anger have its way. "You would've done him a lot more good if you had had a good horse stuck down the front of your dress."

She let his rough tongue punish her, lost in her own perplexity.

"It looks to me," he went on, "like you threw him into a gunfight with that damned drummer knowing he'd get the worst of it with this no-good gun. That drummer certainly was hell-bent to kill him, I could see that much. The kid's got a little more than that kind of treatment coming from you, if you don't mind my saying so."

"No, I don't mind," she answered, moving toward the coach. She leaned against the door with her shoulder, one hand lost in the folds of her dress, the fingertips of her other hand pressed against her forehead. She looked far past him, and in this moment Rhett could see in her eyes what the Osage Kid must certainly have seen there, too. Whatever those dodgers in company waiting rooms might have to say, she wasn't common, and Rhett saw her rise, here and now, to what she must surely be in the Osage Kid's heart. Her voice made a soft whisper across the small space between them, and her words began to shape something out of turmoil, something that had its dark shadows and its bright splendors, its high avenues of hope and its black aisles of woe.

RHETT kept silent, letting her find her way through the mansions and the sorry wreckage. She mentioned the little ring the Osage Kid had given her, and twisted it on her finger to make it look as bright and shining as it was in her heart. The drummer came into her talk, and she gave him a name—Mott Rey, and, with all her twistings and wanderings, what she said began to take on substance in Rhett Winslow's mind, and it made him think less meanly of her.

She named times and places, and spared herself no blame for what she had done. But her feelings for the Osage Kid had betrayed her, giving the drummer a hold on her by threatening to take the Osage Kid down her back-trail. He had dragged her further and further into his plans, until at last there was no pulling back, until at last the blood-stained loot was in Mott Rey's hands. Then he had sprung the trap that threw it all onto the Osage Kid's shoulder. The law knew he couldn't have made the play alone and tried to sweat the truth out of him, but he wouldn't talk, because the truth was apt to touch her. Mott Rey had built up the lynch talk in San Antonio, baiting the sheriff into the move he had finally made. Prim Annie and Mott Rey had followed them to Jamaica Junction and got aboard the same coach. Mott Rey had given her the loaded derringer, and she was to make her opportunity to slip it to the Osage Kid. Until Rhett showed her the weapon and the blank cartridges, she hadn't known definitely that Mott Rey had double-crossed her, that the bogus drummer, unwilling to trust the Kid's loyalty to her, meant to kill him before he got another chance to talk. "He missed one chance," she ended up, "but he'll make himself another."

"Why don't you tell all this to the deputy?" Rhett asked.

"He's turned sour and got himself all fuddled up. I'm telling you because somebody's got to side with the kid."

"What's going on in there now?"

"Nothing. They're just waiting."

"Is Pardee there?"

"He wasn't when I came out."

ABE RUNCH was coming back across the yard, and Rhett took the girl by the arm and walked her toward the house. He heard the sound of King Pardee's voice inside, but he couldn't hear what was said. He kept on toward the window, but she stopped him suddenly, and asked, "Does the kid know the gun was loaded with

blanks? Does he know what was in it?"

Rhett shook his head. "I don't think so. He said the gun was no good, that's all."

"You won't tell him, will you? I'd like to think he'll always have a soft spot in his heart for me."

"I don't see any point in telling him," Rhett confessed.

She stepped to one side out of his reach, and said something he couldn't understand. Her voice had a thin far-off sound as if all the distance in the world was suddenly rushing between them. He felt a sudden vague alarm, but he still didn't fathom her intention; he saw the sharp glint of steel in her hand and heard the odd scared rustle in her throat, but then it was already too late. She staggered uncertainly and her knees gave way.

Rhett caught her in his arms, and hot blood seeped through his shirt. She tried to say something more, but it was only a soft whimper that came to nothing on her lips. The knife handle, slanting up from her breast, caught on his sleeve, and twisted in the wound. She gasped with pain and her breath sifted out of her. He carried her up the steps and fumbled with the doorknob. A rush of footsteps came at him from inside. The door whipped open, and the Osage Kid went past him on a dead run, heading for the barn.

Rhett went on inside. King Pardee, bitter-eyed but stubborn, was holding his gun on the deputy. Mrs. Albee stood near the wall, her mouth hanging. The drummer was in the far corner, his eyes rolling back and forth across the room. Rhett stooped and placed the small figure on the sofa. "I think she's gone," he said.

"What in God's name happened to her?" King Pardee exploded.

"She stabbed herself," Rhett stated. "I don't know why."

The deputy let his hands sag and got on his knees alongside the couch trying to feel a pulse. King Pardee holstered his weapon with a hard shove, and his shoulders suddenly drooped. The drummer moved along the wall. This time King Pardee didn't try to stop him, and he got outside. Rhett started to follow, but the deputy scooped up his gun and stopped him. "I don't trust you," he stated bluntly, circling around toward the door. "Stay here, all of you."

Before he got outside a rattle of gunfire sounded from the barn. A horse pounded away, the hoofs striking a quick scared beat on the hard ground; gradually, they died. Mrs. Pardee sat down in a chair and color came back to her face. They all listened. King Pardee had his back to the room.

MINUTES later another horse left the yard. Rhett went outside. Abe Runch was still puttering with the wheel. "You better watch it till you get to Buck's Mill," he told Rhett.

"Look," Rhett muttered impatiently, "don't think I'm simple. I know a put-up job when I see one."

"Hell, the nut was stripped," Abe flared. "Who took after Lance?"

"The deputy. The drummer fired a couple shots, but I think he missed. I hope to God he did." There was something specially fervent in Abe's prayer, but Rhett didn't understand why right then.

"Where is he now, the drummer, I mean?"

"I don't know."

Rhett prowled around the yard but couldn't find him. In the barn he stumbled over a dead lantern still hot and smoky. He understood Gwen had something to do with this. It had been in her mind when he first saw her in the kitchen. The fake break-down was part of it, to give them time to get their plans organized. Rhett had gone on along with it, because he had thrown all his loyalty to these people where it belonged. He called her name, and his voice rang hollowly among the rafters, but he didn't get an answer. And he didn't locate Mott Rey.

Lance Pardee probably had the best horse on the place, and he knew the country. He gained his freedom, but by so doing had doomed himself to ride the outlaw trail until at last in some far place he stumbled to its smoky ending.

Whether Rhett located Mott Rey, or not, Lance Pardee would be in far country where news like that would probably never travel. He didn't know about Prim Annie, and that news, too, would probably never reach him, or, if it did, it would likely be too late to do him much good.

Rhett threw a circle around the house, still searching. In the dark shadows on

the far side he ran into Gwen, and almost as soon as he saw her he knew what her part in this had been. She had been running. Her hair was wind-whipped and tumbled around her shoulders, the sleeve of her dress was wet with blood. "It's only a scratch," she told him. "A bullet nicked me before I could get away. I've got to get inside and get out of this dress."

"Where's Lance?" Rhett asked.

"In the barn. It was all a trick. Papa didn't want Lance to go, but we needed time to help him, so that's how we worked it. I went instead. Did the deputy follow me?"

"He rode off. I don't know how he could follow you."

"When I got hit I let out a screech, I couldn't help it. I thought maybe the sound of my voice spoiled it all."

"That wasn't the deputy shooting at you," Rhett explained. "It was the drummer. Has Lance got a gun?"

GWEN shook her head. They circled the house and Rhett got her safely inside. Then he headed back to the barn. Before he got to the door he heard the drummer's careful voice lifting through the barn. "You got to get outa here, kid. Come on down."

"You're after my hide, that's all," Lance answered.

"No," Mott Rey insisted. "You don't get things straight, kid. You shouldn't 've made the break up there on the hill. Hell, what could it get you? You didn't have a horse. Figure things out. I did some wild shooting to make it look right, that's all. You got to believe me, kid. You got a gun?"

"No."

"Come on down. I've got one for you. That deputy's on the prowl around here somewhere and you'll need it. That tricky play of yours didn't work."

"Who did that shootin' when Gwen dug out?" Lance asked.

"The deputy."

"Where's Annie?"

"Up at the house, kid. That's another thing. She wants to pull out with you. I'm going to give her the high-sign the minute we get things organized."

"Pop told me to stay here."

"Well, make up your mind."

In spite of his instructions, the pull of what Mott Rey told him brought Lance down. Rhett Winslow heard him slide down the ladder and thud to the hard earth floor. "Right this way, kid." Mott Rey guided him with his voice.

Rhett moved inside and side-stepped along the wall. "Hold it, Lance," he warned. "Keep away from him. He'll gun you."

Mott Rey's gun exploded. A bullet whirred past Rhett's ear and crashed into

The son's sixes spoke for the owlhoot—his father's guns sided the law—and somewhere this side of hell, where their trails crossed—one had to end!

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the planking behind him. He fired into the reaching tongue of flame but his shot hit some metal object and set off a wild clanging that knocked back and forth among the rafters. Rhett moved farther into the barn, his back against a solid hand-hewn beam. Lance butted into something and let out an exasperated oath. Gunflame licked at him. Rhett heard him crash to the floor, and when he moved a little farther he stumbled over his sprawled body.

Rhett moved on, then stopped to listen. A hard thump came from one direction and he fired, raising another wild clamor.

Mott Rey's gun stitched a lurid pattern against the black drape where he had stood. Rhett found the crouching figure. He fired again and Mott Rey yelped with pain. Then silence fell again and Rhett cat-footed across the floor. A bird of some kind, probably a barn swallow or a bat, swooped past, brushing him with its wing. A horse starting kicking and kept it up until boards splintered. All at once, a groping hand touched his leg, froze there a split second, and drew back. Rhett fired pointblank and called back all the wild clamor. Both guns roared, spewing fire like crossed duelling swords. Mott Rey's was the one that finally broke; at the end he held only a small piece of it in his grip, a crimson sword no longer than a hand; the rest of it shattered to pieces on the floor, and Mott Rey crashed down beside it in a dead heap.

"What's going on here?" Abe Runch suddenly called from the door.

Rhett Winslow wiped his hand across his face. "Get a lantern," he told Abe. "It's too damned dark to see what's goin' on."

"I got one," Abe stated, and stepped inside.

RHETT WINSLOW came out of this with one concern still nagging at him. Gwen and her father had made their secret plans and kept him out of it as though he were some chance passerby. He blamed Gwen, because she already knew, when he first came into the kitchen, that something was going to be done. "Why can't you tell a man what's going on?" he grumbled. "I'm not exactly a stranger around here."

"I didn't know what we were going to do," she insisted. "I left that up to papa."

"You knew you were going to do something."

This was around the breakfast table the morning after the fight. The deputy had long since given up his chase and had returned to Pardee's to discover how he had been flim-flammed. Rhett had told him the facts, just as Prim Annie had given them to him, and when he was done the deputy claimed he knew it all the time.

"I've been sitting on that load of dynamite ever since we left Jamaica Junction," he claimed. "I was only waiting for it to explode. That's the reason I didn't want the kid to pull out. He was only bait we dragged out to catch the big curly wolf. But I wish I had more than a corpse to tote back."

He got his wish, because Mott Rey had the loot in his sample cases in the boot of the coach, and he could tote that back, too. Lance Pardee had a wound in his hip that might lame him for life, but a doctor, fetched during the night by Abe Runch from Buck's Mill, had assured them it wasn't likely to prove fatal. What might come of the bitter hurt of his first wild love no one could tell. It would probably seem to him he had stumbled into the last black pit of disaster, but he had been faithful to something bright and shining and no one could call it folly.

The shine was back in Mrs. Pardee's eyes, and she moved around the table with a smile on her lips. She put her hand on Rhett's shoulder and stood behind him a short while in a caressing silence, just as she would have done to Lance in a passing moment of tenderness. It touched Rhett deeply and filled him with content. But it didn't come from Gwen.

He got them all aboard at last, and Gwen climbed up beside him. "I'm going to Buck's Mill," she told him "to see a parson."

"A parson?"

"Yes," she answered quietly, looking steadily at him.

"Ought I to know what for?" he asked, the small edges of his resentment still nudging him.

"Yes," she said, putting her hand in his, "you ought."

THE END

GOLD BARS —IRON GUTS!

By WALT SHELDON

Young Lieutenant Lawrence figured himself a knight in shining armor. But Captain Fagin figured Lawrence as a damned greenhorn shave-tail—until the gold-barred rookie faced an Apache legion—with a load of tin!

INCREDIBLY, he looked dry—and even clean—in all that Arizona sand and sun. He came in on a white charger, and officers, men and Apache scouts gathered at the edge of Fort Dunton, which was really just a group of shacks, and stared. The fact that the new lieutenant was followed by a train of twelve, phlegmatic, droop-eared mules, all packed to the bulging point, made no difference in his dignity, none at all. That was because there was something about the lieutenant.

"Chees, lookit him!" said Sergeant

They got off from Fort Dunton early the next morning

Keppelberger in his best St. Louis Dutch.

Captain Fagin's chewing straw went to the right, and upward.

The lieutenant—the second lieutenant—sat with his shoulders back and his spine straight as a Joshua stalk and his chin miles from his chest. Five-eleven, or so, but he looked taller the way he sat. Slender, too, yet his seat gave him a kind of breadth and magnificence. They could study his face now. Dark, keen-edged brows sweeping to the bridge of his nose in a shallow V. Warm gray eyes, long lashes. Nice chin.

Wives and sisters indoors, gentlemen.

The lieutenant dismounted and saluted Captain Fagin. That was something to see in itself . . . not much saluting went on around Fort Dunton.

"Lawrence, Drew A.," the lieutenant said crisply. "I've orders to report here. Would you be good enough, sir, to direct me to the senior officer present?" His voice was pleasant in an official sort of way. Nothing you could really call offensive. And yet. . . .

But Captain Jeremiah Fagin did his best. He smiled all over his scarred, hawk-nosed face. He stuck out his hand. "Guess I'm senior officer here, Lawrence. Glad to have you. We sure need military talent, what with El Pinto acting up again. But you'll learn all about that later. Come on up to headquarters and we'll have a drink."

Lawrence shook Fagin's hand with a good enough grip; he smiled a little stiffly, almost as though he hadn't practiced smiling much. Everything might have gone on just fine from there if Soapweed and Apples hadn't started a fight at that moment. Or maybe not. Maybe Lieutenant Lawrence and Captain Fagin were just plain fated to rub each other the wrong way. Anyway, Soapweed and Apples brought it about quickly. They had real names, these two Apache scouts, but no one ever tried to learn them. Soapweed was so-called because his untallowed hair stuck out like the spikes of that plant. Apples had pink, round cheeks, peculiar for an Indian. They were White Mountain Apaches, and good as scouts because they were almost docile when sober and hated the Chiricahuas for obscure but militarily convenient reasons.

They weren't sober now. They were going after each other with butcher knives.

"One minute, Lawrence," said Captain Fagin, spotting the fight. He moved off with a rolling, husky step. The others gave way. Men in rumpled blue trousers, some boot-tucked, some not, assorted shirts, one or two red flannel underwear tops and both broad-brimmed and forage caps. Apache scouts in all conceivable permutations of Indian and Army dress.

"Now, then, you damned coffee-coolers!" said Captain Fagin, reaching the belligerents. Both his hands moved quickly. Both closed on knife-wrists. He squeezed and twisted and the blades dropped to the ground. Soapweed and Apples looked at him, startled, but not yet quite comprehending. He knocked their heads together. He grabbed the shirt fronts of both men with his left hand, held them together, and then began to slap them easily and firmly with his right. One, two—each in turn. Slapping until some kind of sense about the matter seemed to creep into their eyes. "Keppelberger! Get these two lunatics into the guardhouse for tonight!" he called.

Sergeant Keppelberger of St. Louis came thickly and stolidly forward, beckoned to a detail, and a moment later the two scouts were being marched to a small, adobe hut across the compound square.

Fagin muttered about the affair as he and the new lieutenant walked toward headquarters. Not too concernedly. "Happens whenever they get cooked, like that," he said. "Don't know where they got the likker this time. Stole it probably. Well, they're both good boys and they'll be all right tomorrow."

"Captain," said Lieutenant Lawrence icily, "what about the regulation against striking enlisted men?"

"Hmm?" Fagin turned his head with just mild curiosity at first.

THERE was nothing but complete earnestness on Lawrence's face. "I realize," he said, "that in an outpost like this there are bound to be irregularities. And perhaps it's irregular to criticize one's commanding officer. But in all conscience, sir, I must protest against your striking those scouts. Surely, Captain, you realize

this is the one action which completely undermines command—"

"Wait on a minute!" Fagin stopped in the dust, put his thumbs in his belt and looked the lieutenant up and down. "Damned if you don't talk like a West Point manual, boy. Where'd you get it?"

"If you're referring to my last assignment—writing bulletins in Washington—well, it wasn't the most active of duties. But I'd like you to know, Captain, that I requested tactical assignment constantly. And I only got it through a lucky bit of influence. My father's a retired general. General Lawrence."

"Well, *now* the soap starts to sud!" said Fagin. He spat into the dust, near-side. "General Lawrence., I was a drummer boy in his battalion at Antietam. We had four whole companies of Johnny Rebs dead cold in a valley, and instead of ordering the fire that would have killed every one, General Lawrence—Major, then—allowed 'em a sporting chance and a fair start. Maybe he told you the lads in gray whupped the hell out of us at Antietam. Chivalry, it was, with him. Now, Lieutenant, don't tell me *you're* another one of thsee chivalry fellows. Please don't tell me that."

"Captain," said Lawrence stiffly, "our family is descended from the knights of the tenth century. I know that may not seem important to you, but the tradition of *noblesse oblige—*"

"Wait on," said Fagin. He waved his hand wearily. "Maybe we can talk about all this when we know each other better. I think right now we'd better stick to business."

"Naturally, sir," said Lawrence.

Fagin sighed. They reached the headquarters building which was low, and built of adobe like the others. In a moment they were inside and Lawrence was signing arrival and Fagin was across the unpainted wooden desk. Fagin had his boots hiked on to it. Fagin started to reach under the desk. "Like a drink, Lawrence.

"Not on duty, if you don't mind, Captain," said Lawrence, without batting an eye.

Fagin made a noise that sounded like: "Rmgh." Then he jerked his thumb toward the outside. "I see they sent my mules along with you from Fort Apache. We can use them. Horses aren't much account for pack out here. Did the quartermaster put in those gunnysacks I ordered?"

Lawrence fumbled in the pocket of his tunic. Fagin still couldn't see how he wore that hot coat on this hot day in this hot country and still look crisp as new linen. Lawrence said, "I have the ticket here on the shipment . . . I don't seem to remember any gunnysacks."

Fagin took the manifest, read it, scowled, then dropped his palm to the desk. "Damn them!" he said. "Fourth time I've put in for those sacks. And no sign of them." He brought the paper closer to his eyes suddenly. "What the hell's *this?* Tin sheet, covering, dwelling unit, twelve each. I didn't ask for any tin sheet!"

"Oh, that." Lawrence moved around to look at the paper. "Post engineer at Apache explained that to me. Order from Department H.Q. All barracks are to be roofed with tin sheet, as available. He said to be sure to explain that to you .... the orders would follow."

"Holy Mother of God!" said Captain Fagin. He slammed the manifest to the desk. Drawn by anger, Celtic eloquence welled to his tongue. "When, Lieutenant, I ask you now, will the eternal stupidity of the military cease? When will the bone in the head of high brass lose just a mite, just a jot, just a millionth of a millimeter of its thickness. When, by the Good God, will—"

"Seems to me very astute of the department to send that roofing," said Lawrence. "It's quite rain proof and should be excellent for the morale of the men in the barracks."

"Rainproof, is it?" roared Fagin. He pointed out of the window. Pointed at the white hot air, and not even a breeze to curl the dust in the drill area. "In this country? Listen, out here you do what the natives do. You pile dirt on your roof. Nice, cool, heavy dirt. Lots of it. Because if you use anything else your building will be good for baking tortillas, but not for living in."

He got up and started to pace. "Well, now, this is a sad day at Fort Dunton. Lieutenant, I'm trying to be fair about this

but I might as well tell you you couldn't have come at a worse time. With your chivalry and your cargo of tin. As though I haven't enough on my mind. This very morning a runner came in from the San Estevan Agency and advised me cheerfully that El Pinto's dances haven't stopped. That the scouts who deserted last month are with El Pinto's crazy contingent, waving feathers and rattles and dancing with the rest of them."

"I'm afraid I don't understand, Captain," said Lawrence.

Fagin explained. From tightened lips, he explained. "El Pinto's a medicine man. He's stirring them up. He's started dancing again on the reservation, and they're all gathering 'round the agency keeping it up day and night. Several tribes. Won't be long before some of the hotheads break away and start a trail of murder again. Like Victorio and Juh and Noch-Ay-Del-Klinne. Besides that, it's stopped construction at the agency, and—" He stopped short. He snapped his fingers. "That's it!"

"That's what, sir?"

"We'll take the damned tin sheet to the agency and that'll both account for the tin, and give us an excuse to go there?"

"Go there?"

Fagin's mouth and chin became very firm. "To bring El Pinto back. Protective custody, or something. I'll think of an excuse later. Maybe I'll get away with it; maybe not, but it's the only way I know to stop those dances."

"Do you mean to say you're authorized to arrest an Indian without charges and throw him into confinement. Just like that?"

"I didn't say anything about authorization." Fagin laughed. "Maybe that's why I'm still a captain, with enough time and campaigns to wear eagles, at least."

"It could very well be," said Lawrence dryly.

Fagin looked at him sharply but didn't pursue the matter. He said instead—with a faint sigh— "Well, if you won't have that drink with me, I'll have it alone. Now."

THEY got off from Fort Dunton early the next morning. Thirty men, two officers, sixteen Apache scouts. And twelve mules. They wound along through the winding scars of the hot country; they trod the burning earth; the thin crust over the sea of boiling lava. They traveled on into the oven of the day, into the time when the birds disappeared, waiting for sundown. Lean and touch a cactus palm and blister your hand. Pass the panting jackrabbit outstretched at a sage plant—ignoring you. Too hot to run. Too hot for you to shoot him. In common misery, a kind of peace. Truce, anyway.

Only through Mica Canyon was it even bearable.

Captain Fagin led the troop six miles out of its way so that it might pass through this long notch between two huge mesas. The sun didn't reach the bottom of Mica Canyon much, and by some fluke of pressure air passed through it all the time, southwest to northeast. They wound along the stony rubble of Mica Canyon, breathing normally at last, wiping their brows and staring at all the looming, glittering rock that shot heavenward on either side.

"Quite a spot for an ambush," remarked Lieutenant Lawrence.

"Yes," said Fagin. "We caught a band of hostiles here—last year—reversing the usual order. Things were quiet for months after *that* engagement."

Lawrence looked at his commanding officer. "Mica Canyon," he mused, frowning. "That was the battle where they were all wiped out?"

"Yes."

"Their women, too, I believe?"

Fagin shrugged. "The squaws fought. We tried not to shoot them, but sometimes you couldn't tell the difference. A lot died by their own hands."

"A fine and glorious battle," said Lawrence acidly. "They read of these things in the newspapers back east and they cheer. As for me—I become sick. Literally sick to think of it."

"Now, look here, Lawrence." Fagin shifted in the saddle. "They call this Indian business war and they issue campaign medals for it. But it's not quite the same thing. Not what you learn at the Point. What makes it different is the enemy, himself—who is not exactly an enemy. He's got his own ways—some of them fine, some of them not. It bothered

you because I struck those two men yesterday. Well, under those particular circumstances, it was necessary. You'd know if you'd been here a while. Today either Apples or Soapweed would follow me to the gates of hell."

"Luckily you won't have to prove that statement," said Lawrence.

Fagin stared at him. "Friend," he said slowly, "you've got to get rid of all your ideas about warfare and chivalry and everything else, and start over again. For survival, for sheer survival. I mean that with all my heart. If you don't learn, Lawrence, you'll end up staked through the belly to the ground, your eyeballs torn out and put back the wrong way in your sockets and your ears pinned to your nose with cactus thorns."

Lawrence said, "When I was a boy they used to threaten me with the bogey man."

Fagin sighed and gave up. . . .

* * *

There was a red, retiring sun in the west when the column finally reached the San Estevan Agency, but the air wasn't yet quite cool. They sweated and listened to the drums as they mounted the long rise to the mesa on which the agency had put its flag and buildings.

The drums went: *Boom*-boom-boom; *boom*-boom-boom; *boom*.

The voices of the singers, in minor key and quarter tone, put a sheath around the naked drum-beat.

Boom-boom-boom. . . .

Second Lieutenant Drew Lawrence looked toward the top of the rise, saw the first silhouettes of the dancers and shuddered a little. That, of course, made him angry with himself.

The agent rode a mule half way down the rise to meet them. Fagin halted the column, and the agent came up to him. He was a round little man with a great shock of curly, ginger-colored hair, much of it spilling from the sweatband of his felt. He was puffing, red-eyed, and he needed a shave. He was a little drunk. "Captain," he exclaimed, "I'm mighty glad to see you. Though I don't know why."

Fagin introduced Lawrence. "This is Mr. Scobie, Lieutenant Lawrence." Lawrence shook hands with Scobie and found himself with five fingers full of warm, moist fat.

"Three days now they've been going strong," said Scobie, wiping his brow. He glanced for a moment at the top of the mesa. "They start just about this time. And then they go on. All night. All night. I haven't had any sleep since they started. Too much noise at night, too much worry in the day."

Fagin nodded. "We're going to take El Pinto back with us, Scobie."

"I see," said Scobie. He started to nod. Then he snapped his head up suddenly. "Take El Pinto with you?"

"That's what I said. Would have done it before this, but my mules just arrived. And I wouldn't take a chance campaigning without them. You know what happened to Parker a few months ago when they killed his mules off. Got the last four men of his command within sight of the post."

"But—but—Captain. That pack there will go crazy if you take El Pinto. They'll tear you limb from limb."

"Not if it's done right," said Fagin.

SCOBIE squared his fat shoulders. "I can't allow it, Captain. I'm in charge of this agency and I won't allow it."

Fagin grinned. "After it's done, and things quiet down, and everybody at the Department says what a brilliant idea it was for you to call me in—you'll allow it, then. Anyway, I've got an excuse for being here. I've got some tin for your roofs." He waved back toward the pack train. "Whole shipment of it there."

Scobie stiffened and the stiffening made his fat tremble, but he stayed stiff just the same. "I won't allow it, and I won't accept your tin, whatever the devil that's for, and I don't authorize your being in the agency! Things are bad enough, Captain. What are you trying to do to me?"

"Save your carcass," said Fagin. He turned then, swept his arm overhead and forward, and bawled for his command to march.

The command marched, up and to the top of the mesa. Fagin didn't even answer Scobie's protests which followed along on muleback.

And there was the dance. In the red, deep sunset light, the dance. At the east end the four drums, the women behind

them, in line, shuffling, two steps over and one back, then reverse. The men in a double line before them. Facing each other; miniature bows and arrows in hand. One mind, one muscle moving all—the only separation of soul in war paint. Blue stone, deer blood, green copper ore and American vermilion. Across the nose, daubed here down the center of a low forehead, high on the sharp cheeks, and now along the edge of a chin.

The singers wailed. This was medicine.

At the other end stood El Pinto, tall for an Apache, white-haired and quiet. Quiet under his dried, splotched skin, under the faulty pigmentation that had given him his name. The Painted One.

He saw the soldiers appear and he lifted his hand.

The drums stopped.

Fagin whispered quickly to Lawrence. "Keep the command still as ice. Keep them here. Form for skirmish if I drop my hand. Keep your eye on me."

"You're not going out there alone?"

"I certainly am." He turned and beckoned to Apples, whose face he had slapped. "Come on. I'll be needing your tongue, lad."

Captain Fagin, big-shouldered, big-chested and hawk-nosed, walked out into the space between the line of stilled dancers. He walked easily. Apples, a pace or so behind him, walked easily too, but you could see that it was the easiness of Fagin, himself, spilling over into the Apache scout. It was none of his own. He was following Fagin to the gates of hell, as Fagin had said he would. The dancers watched; they moved only their eyes.

Fagin stopped before El Pinto.

The Painted One lifted a skinny arm and said, *"Ayay. U-ka-she!"*

Fagin understood that. He said to Apples, "Tell him I'll leave, as he requests. But tell him he must go with me. Tell him his wisdom is needed and he must parley long with me at the fort."

Apples delivered the message.

El Pinto looked Captain Fagin in the eye and shook his head. Once. Silently.

Fagin moved suddenly, then. That was the strength of his plan—they had known all along he might do something like this, but none had known he would do it so suddenly. The thing happened in a flash.

He slapped at the pistol, drew it, jumped behind El Pinto, and stuck the pistol into his back. "Tell him to march," he said to Apples. "Say this good and loud so they'll all hear. Say that if they take so much as one step toward us I'll pull the trigger."

Apples said it good and loud.

Fagin pushed El Pinto forward. He said as he walked, "Tell them also that if any white man is harmed by any of them for the time El Pinto is my guest, El Pinto dies."

Apples said that, too.

They didn't watch quietly as Fagin passed down the line this time. They breathed hard, and they muttered, and it was both hate and fear that moved their eyes. Fagin marched all the way to the mounted troops and called out four names. Two soldiers, two Apache scouts; the guard. He formed them, placed El Pinto in the center, and put Sergeant Keppelberger in charge. He told Lawrence to take over the mule train, ride with it and keep his eye peeled to the rear.

Then he mounted his horse, turned it, and yelled: "Forrrrd—HAR!"

The column moved off, every manjack feeling dark eyes upon his spine.

IT WAS dark before Lawrence rode forward to speak to Fagin again. Full dark. The moon hadn't risen yet. The stars were diamonds floating in jet. Blurred soapweed and Joshua plants looked like squatting bowmen, every one of them. Lawrence shuddered as he rode forward and this time he wasn't a bit ashamed of it.

"Captain, you're not going to travel all night, are you? The men are dog-tired."

"No. We'll camp soon. I just wanted to get far enough away to make them think I might travel all night. Of course, they may follow us anyway. But that's all right. We've got our mules and ammunition this time. I think we can take care of them if they attack."

"Do you think they'll attack?"

"By daylight, if they do."

They moved to a small rise after that, and just before they came to the crest of it, Fagin gave the command to halt. The first edge of the moon appeared over

the horizon. Lawrence looked about and saw that they were near a sparse mesquite clump, between two arroyos which slashed down from the hill, and he nodded approvingly. Good bivouac; good position—the bushes and the gullies offered cover and they would be below the crest, so that they wouldn't make silhouetted targets if they stood. At least, this Captain Fagin wasn't above following the textbook in some matters.

They could make no fires; the command supped on canned corned beef and hard biscuit. They swigged at their canteens and made faces and wished profanely that it were coffee. One or two produced whiskey bottles and Lawrence frowned, but said nothing, since Captain Fagin saw it, too, and didn't seem inclined to care.

The young lieutenant went back to see that the mules were properly picketed for the night. He insisted that their pack—food, ammunition, sheet tin and the rest—be neatly stacked and guarded. After that he stretched himself upon the ground to rest for a few minutes before he should check several other things and have a last chat with Fagin.

He was fast asleep in two minutes.

* * *

He dreamed that night that he was in Virginia. He dreamed that his father, old Lawrence, came down the long, white banistered steps in full armor—the suit that had always stood on the first landing and then the room was suddenly filled with beautiful maidens with long conical hats, veils trailing from them, and Lieutenant Lawrence rose in the air and flew among the tinkling chandeliers while they called encouragement to him in their sweet and maidenly voices. Quite remarkably, he was now dressed in full armor, too, lance couched at his side. The big chandelier turned into a dragon and he charged it—

* * *

Sergeant Keppelberger woke him by shaking his shoulder, and he sat up quickly and saw that it was morning, and wondered why he hadn't heard reveille. Then he remembered where they were, and realized there would be no reveille out here for the hostiles to hear, too.

They were about to move anyway, so fires were permitted. There was coffee for breakfast. Lawrence carried his tin cup with him to supervise the re-packing of the mules. Fagin walked up to him and said, "Well, I'll say this for you. When you're assigned a job you do it right. And those mules are mighty important. The Apaches know it, too; they'll try first thing to stampede them if they attack. If they can't do that, they'll shoot to kill them."

Lawrence shrugged. "Doing a job is only part of *noblesse oblige*. That's why we have an officer corps—a knighthood, you might say."

"Flaming mother jennet!" Fagin swore. He stared at Lawrence for another moment, then turned and walked off.

Lawrence watched the packing some more and dropped into deep thought. His gray eyes became dreamy and his fine chin tightened down with meditation.

He moved forward suddenly and began to give new instructions.

It was hot, as usual, almost before there had been enough morning to call it morning. Captain Fagin's detachment crawled across the desert. The Apache scouts, with their long hair, knee-length moccasins and ludicrous bits of uniform, fanned out ahead. Fagin next, on a dusty half-Arab; a runty, chunky horse, but a desert horse. Then the troop on its fine Missouri mounts, which were already barreling and sore of hoof. El Pinto, walking solemnly, while his four guards, wilted, slogged along with him. The rest of the command, then Lawrence and three privates with the pack train.

This way, over the pebbled desert, the cactus and the curled grass—with the sun a hard, hot, hating eye. A man dropped and they soaked a rag with precious water and put it across his head, then mounted him again.

They came to the two huge mesas; to the left they saw the indentation that was the mouth of Mica Canyon.

Fagin started to wheel the column obliquely to the right.

Lawrence galloped up to him. "Captain, wait! Hold on, Captain! What about the canyon?" He pointed to the left.

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Fagin answered snappishly. The heat, maybe. Ordinarily he was a collected man, but today the heat had scattered his feelings about a bit. "I think it was you, Lieutenant, who figured that was a good place for an ambush. Forget your textbook tactics already?"

Lawrence drew his shoulders back. "Seems to me we have a strong enough force here to take care of an ambush. Especially if we're looking for it. But that's not the point." He switched around in the saddle and pointed along the column. "Look at the men. Look at them. They're half dead in this heat and some might be all dead in another hour of it. The men in his command, Captain, are an officer's responsibility, and—"

"Dammit, Lawrence!" roared Fagin. "Get the hell back with your baggage!"

Drew Lawrence stared for a moment, then said crisply, "Yes, sir." He rode back to the baggage train.

HE RODE to one side of the column and he could see Fagin riding his dusty pony up ahead. He could see him turn often and glower back at the men. He didn't actually see the glower on his face but the sense of it was there. It was in the way he sat.

The column continued to the oblique right for another ten minutes and then suddenly Captain Fagin was making motions and bawling orders again.

Lieutenant Lawrence smiled and dutifully led the pack train in the column's wake.

It was cool in the canyon, but it was also quiet. This was a damnable and pregnant quiet, too. They went slowly through the winding, steep-walled passage, and presently Lawrence realized that it wasn't completely quiet. There was the sound of that air whispering along the rock. But for some reason that was even worse than dead quiet would have been. He looked at the mules and they were casting their heads about, sniffing. He looked at the horses, and even they were skittery, and horses aren't half as bright as mules about matters such as these.

Lawrence laid his finger under his collar, quirked his neck, frowned.

(Please turn to page 92)

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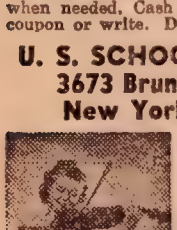

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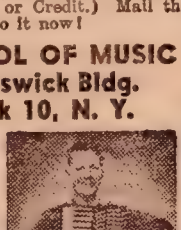

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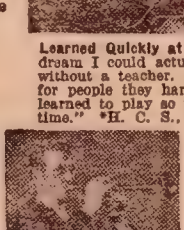

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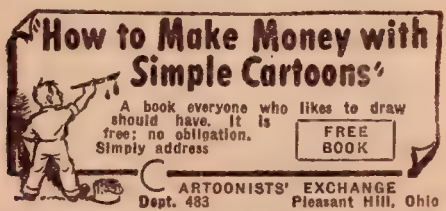
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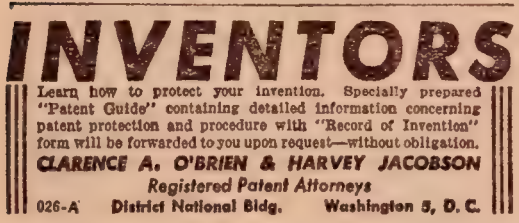
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(Continued from page 90)

He looked upward. The rocks were green and orange and gold, but all in shadow. Cactus grew among them. Beyond was the robin's egg sky and the shimmering sense of fear charged all through it. A buteo-hawk wheeled up there, white on the underside except for the black tips of its oval wings, and the reddish, translucent tail.

Then Lawrence brought his head down again and saw that he and the pack train had fallen behind. The last of the main body of horse was just disappearing around a bend ahead. "Wake up, Lawrence," he said to himself. "Stop dreaming." He set a new pace for the mules and his three men.

He went perhaps fifty feet.

Pyangggg! Wheeeeeee!

Shot, ricochet and echo—from the canyon walls—from somewhere up there.

"Dismount! Take cover!" Lawrence shouted.

Pyang! Pyang! Pyang! Pyang!

The canyon was thick with the sound of shots, and bits of smoke were drifting away from places here and there on the plunging slopes. Lawrence heard one bullet whistle past his head. He dismounted, spanked his horse off, and drew his pistol. He trotted the few steps back to where the mules were being formed in a circle. They were snorting and pawing, pulling at their lines. But already they were picketed. The three men acting as packers were in the middle, firing over their backs. Firing at scarves of smoke and movement up on the canyon walls.

Lawrence pushed in with them, then turned and started firing, too.

The private beside him was long-boned and blond and covered with dust. "Lieutenant," he said, "they're *all* after mules. The howlin' pack of them!"

"Yes, I suppose so." Lawrence nodded absent-mindedly. He looked down the canyon, toward the bend that hid the rest of the column. He heard the rattle of firing from there; he saw the drifting smoke. He looked up and saw Indians crawling and sliding down to better vantage points. He watched a few arrows mutter out from the rocks. He understood, then. A small group of them was

holding the detachment there around the bend, while the bulk of them attacked the mules. They had probably followed along through the canyon and waited for this moment when the detachment and the mule train became separated.

THEY kept firing. Half-naked men tumbled from rock and bush cover; some threw their arms in the air when they were hit, some just pitched forward and rolled for awhile before they were still.

An arrow lobbed toward them, loomed for a terrible instant, then whistled precisely into the space between Lawrence's and the blond private's head.

Lawrence fired at a yellow head cloth and saw its owner stumble.

Pyang! Pyang! Pyang!

There was angry, warm lead in the air. All around them, all around their heads and shoulders. And sharp in the nostrils the bite of combusted powder.

Most of the shooting stopped suddenly. Abruptly, they heard only the rattle of fire directed at the main column. No smoke drifts, no arrows in their part of the canyon; Lawrence lifted his head cautiously—

The blond private said, "A charge coming up, Lieutenant. They always stop firing before they charge."

"Load, then. Load quickly. Break open new ammunition if you have to."

Swift fingers worked at carbines. Lawrence filled the hot cylinder of his pistol again.

They were coming from both slopes. Yelling, screaming, punching their bellies to send out the cries with greater force. Stopping to squat and fire. Squat and fire. Sending four arrows in half that many seconds from a short bow. Firing with rifles they had stolen.

Then they stopped their charge. The three men behind the plunging, quivering mules were still firing back. The Apache has not stomach for a charge when men keep firing back. The attackers began to shout to one another, wave and shout.

"They can't figure why the mules ain't kilt," grinned the blond private.

Lawrence grinned back. "No, they can't."

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And then, in the midst of that puzzled lull, the rest of the detachment came galloping around the bend. They were bound to burst from that holding fire sooner or later, but the lull made it sooner. They hell-batted back to the pack train, dismounted on the fly and began to send a terrible fire into the Apaches on the slopes.

A few got away. Those who didn't, and were still alive, put their hands in the air and surrendered.

When they got under way again Lieutenant Drew Lawrence rode at the head of the column with Captain Jeremiah Fagin. Fagin was pleased; his hawk-face was as mellow as a hawk-face can be. And he had the column turned in the other direction, toward the San Estevan Agency.

He was taking El Pinto back again.

"Yes, sir," he said, "they'll stay quiet for a long time now. Most of the hotheads who wouldn't ever have reformed were killed off here in the canyon. And El Pinto's promised to be a good lad, which saves me from breaking any more regulations. Maybe I'll get to be a major yet. Who knows?" He chuckled. "El Pinto says he didn't know our medicine was so strong. That's why he's going to behave."

"What does he mean by that?" asked Lawrence.

"The mules, man. They fired and fired at them—and couldn't kill even one. That was quite an idea of yours to pack the tin roofing over their flanks and cover it with tarp. How'd you think of it?"

Lawrence smiled. "I didn't. Knights have been putting armor on their mounts ever since the days of King Arthur. I just happened to remember it, that's all." His smile became a grin. "Same way I'm trying to remember all the things I'm learning about Indians from you, Captain."

"Well, by God!" said Captain Fagin. "Maybe there is something in this knighthood business, now, after all!" He fumbled in his saddlebag and found a pint bottle. "It's not the holy grail, lad—but will you have a swig with me, anyway?"

"Under the circumstances," said Lieutenant Lawrence, "yes."

GUARDIANS OF THE BREED

By DAVE SANDS

THE thunder of their hoofs has died, the earth no longer trembles with their passing. The human scavengers have gathered up and marketed the bones that whitened the western plains, and there is little left to show that herds of buffalo once covered our land.

But little is known of the men with calm, far-seeing eyes who gave so freely of their wisdom, their strength, or their wealth to preserve the remnants of a dying breed and save the noble bison species from extinction.

As early as 1886, Colonel Charles Goodnight became aware of the danger that threatened the buffalo, and a short time later, at the persistent pleading of his wife, began building a small herd on Wagon Creek in the Panhandle of Texas. Goodnight had noticed that a young calf strayed from its mother would follow a hunter's horse back to camp, and he used this method to capture six.

After Goodnight died in 1929, a prominent Texan formed a syndicate to insure the herd's preservation.

• During the spring of 1873 Walking Coyote, a Pend d'Oreille Indian, captured two male and two female buffalo calves which he afterwards sold to Pablo, a Flathead. It was from the Pablo herd, years later, that the Wainwright herd in Canada, the Yellowstone Park herd and the Montana herd were formed.

Between the years of 1885 and 1889, Charles J. (Buffalo) Jones captured a number of buffalo calves, of which fifty-seven survived. This herd changed hands several times, grew as the years passed and was finally sold to the state of Arizona.

BUT it is not only to the efforts of such men as Goodnight, Walking Coyote and Buffalo Jones that the bison owes its existence. In 1886, Dr. William Hornaday, then chief taxidermist of the National Museum in Washington, and later President of the American Bison Society, be-

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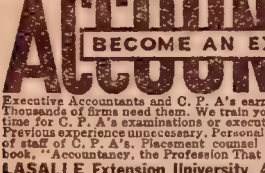

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came so alarmed at the difficulty of finding buffalo while making an extensive hunt for specimens, that he worked tirelessly to bring this critical condition to the attention of the indifferent authorities.

Despite the urgent pleas of Dr. Hornaday and other renowned naturalists, and the bitingly satirical cartoons from the acid-dripping pen of the famous Thomas Nast, it was not until 1894, through the personal efforts of the well-known lawyer-sportsman Hallet Phillips, that Congress finally became aware of the desperate plight of the buffalo, and President Cleveland signed a bill making it unlawful to kill one in Yellowstone National Park.

Yet even the passage of this bill might have availed nothing had it not been for the unceasing vigilance and two-fisted justice of Government Scout Captain Burgess, in charge of the park. There were only a handful of buffalo on the entire North American continent, outside of the ones in private herds, and "sportsmen" were paying as much as $1500 for a mounted head. Of course this attracted poachers, and Burgess knew that his charges were being slaughtered right in their last sanctuary. He worked tirelessly and finally succeeded in catching one poacher. Burgess wired the War Department for instructions and the War Department answered that since the prisoner was held without any authority of law, he must be released. This, of course, Burgess was reluctant to do, but orders were orders. He frowned, then called his biggest and toughest sergeant.

"Sergeant," the captain said softly, "I've got to go away for a few minutes, and I'm leaving this buffalo killer in your charge. Be very careful he doesn't hurt you."

The sergeant saluted, winked—then rolled up his sleeves and flexed his brawny forearms. "Buffalo killer, eh?" he murmured thoughtfully. After that, no more poachers ever came to the park, and the few surviving buffalo remained alive until the government passed a law for their protection—with teeth in it—and the American Bison Society was formed to further the work of conservation under Federal Aid.

BUFFALO BONES

By JOHN PARKER

THE hunters who built Fort Bridger, Fort Laramie, and other trading posts along the shores of the Yellowstone, the Arkansas and the Platte, would never have ventured into the unbroken wilderness, a thousand miles from the last outpost of civilization, had not the Lewis and Clark expedition brought back glowing reports of the fortunes that could be gained from buffalo hides.

The hordes who crossed the plains to the gold fields of California along the Santa Fe and Oregon trails could never have survived but for the huge herds of buffalo that provided their meat.

And the thousands of homesteaders who came into the west with little besides an old horse, an old wagon and a heart filled with hope and determination, might never have won a foothold but for bleached buffalo bones.

Many portions of the plains were literally white with the bones from the carcasses the hide hunters had left behind, and countless homesteaders obtained money with which to buy seeds for the first crop, and tools with which to plant and harvest, by gathering and selling bones to the local storekeepers, who in turn shipped them east where they were used for fertilizer, and for carbon in the refining of sugar.

The year the Santa Fe railroad reached Dodge City, an old man with a broken-down wagon and a weary horse began wandering over the prairie, picking up bones and carting them to town.

The following year he bought a team and wagon for his son. Anxious to load its empty cars for the trip back east, the railroad gave "Old Buffalo Bones" a very low freight rate. Records indicate that in two years the old man shipped over three thousand carloads, and was worth a large fortune.

Others soon followed his example, and in a few years the bone trade became one of the most important industries in Dodge, and according to one Kansas newspaper of

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that time, buffalo bones were legal tender in that city.

Soon great piles of bones were stacked along the railroad tracks by their owners, and according to the report of a man named John Cross, there was one pile about twenty miles from Grenada, Colorado, that measured "twelve feet high, twelve feet wide, and half a mile long." This practice of piling up the bones and leaving them unguarded would not have been established, however, had not the law courts decided that a man had the same right to put his brand—and make it stick—on a buffalo skull as on the hide of a steer.

A short time before the last rail of the Denver-Fort Worth line was spiked in place, a freighter named Kilfoile realized that he would shortly be out of work, and instead of bringing back his wagon empty, began to load it with buffalo bones which he stacked in great piles along the tracks. Each time he started a new pile, Kilfoile would choose the skull of a huge bull and carefully mark on it with charcoal a large "K." "K for krazy!" the other freighters laughed. "Who ever heard of branding buffler skulls?"

Later Kilfoile gave up freighting entirely, hired several men to help him, and when the railroad was ready to receive freight, Kilfoile had plenty on hand. Huge piles of his bones were piled at every way station along the tracks, for a distance of a hundred and fifty miles.

The men who had laughed at Kilfoile now rushed wildly into the bone business with the result that prices fell, but Kilfoile didn't have to worry about prices. He had an iron-bound contract with a St. Louis merchant, and every load of his bones was sold at $6.00 to $8.00 a ton. Jealous competitors tried to prove in court that Kilfoile had no claim to the pile of bones, but the courts ruled in favor of Kilfoile: A man's brand had always been a respected proof of ownership, and Kilfoile had branded his bones, hadn't he?

The bone trade continued for years, and although prices fell somewhat, they never went below four dollars a ton. It is recorded that in Kansas alone two and a half million dollars were paid out for buffalo bones between 1868 and 1881.

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